TUESDAY FEBRUARY 12, 2019

SINCE 1845

THE STRAITS TIMES

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New measures to boost safety in SAF in wake of two training deaths

Ng Eng Hen stresses Mindef and SAF's responsibility, sheds more light on incidents

Lim Min Zhang

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen yesterday announced new measures to boost training safety in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) while revealing fresh details in Parliament about the recent training deaths of two national servicemen, including actor Aloysius Pang.

Stressing that the Ministry of Defence (Mindef) and the SAF are responsible for the lives of all national servicemen under their charge, Dr Ng said he was "deeply sorry for the loss of four precious national servicemen in the last 17 months".

"Mindef and the SAF will hold ourselves accountable for every single national serviceman entrusted to us... The SAF will strengthen its safety systems," he added.

In a 50-minute speech, Dr Ng shed more light on the circumstances that led to the deaths of national servicemen Corporal First Class (CFC) Liu Kai last November and CFC (NS) Pang on Jan 23.

Other than them, two national servicemen and a regular have died since September 2017, following a period of zero fatalities from 2013 to 2016.

Dr Ng said CFC Liu's Land Rover was mounted by a reversing Bionix Infantry Fighting Vehicle on Nov 3 last year during a field training exercise despite repeated commands by the rear guide to stop the Bionix.

Investigations are under way on whether the communications set used by the Bionix crew of four was working at that time, said Dr Ng, sharing preliminary findings by the independent Committee of Inquiry (COI) into the incident at the Jalan Murai training area.

Dr Ng said two additional emergency horn buttons have been installed in all Bionix training vehicles since last November to allow crew members to sound the alarm in the event of an intercom failure.

From next month, rear-view cameras will be progressively installed on the Bionix training fleet.

On the incident involving CFC Pang, Dr Ng said inspections of the Singapore Self-Propelled Howitzer, which the actor was doing repair works on during a military exercise in New Zealand, did not detect any machine malfunction of the gun-lowering mechanism.

CFC Pang, 28, failed to get out of the way of the barrel as it was lowered on Jan 19, leading to injuries to his chest and abdomen.

Dr Ng said the servicemen involved in both incidents have been redeployed from their operational roles.

Police investigations are ongoing to determine culpability in CFC Liu's case, and the Attorney-General's Chambers will decide on possible criminal proceedings. Even if no charges are filed, Mindef may charge those who breach military law in military court, said Dr Ng.

In CFC Pang's case, the Chief Military Prosecutor will decide if any serviceman is to be prosecuted for criminal or military offences. Neither the police nor the state coroner has jurisdiction over deaths outside Singapore, he said.

On the "systemic measures" the SAF will undertake, Dr Ng said that commanders who are responsible for safety lapses will be marked in their performance review even if no accident takes place.

He also said that the newly announced Inspector-General's Office (IGO) will be headed by the Chief of Staff-Joint Staff.

Mindef said the IGO, to be set up in the first half of the year, will have powers to conduct independent audits and promote safety culture across the service and formation headquarters.

MPs filed 20 questions on training deaths and safety standards in the SAF, with opposition Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh (Aljunied GRC) speaking on the importance of NS in an adjournment motion.

In his speech, Dr Ng acknowledged that military training poses risk but stressed Singapore must never give up on NS, which forms the backbone of the SAF. "This imperative of NS and our national defence does not absolve or reduce the accountability of the Ministry of Defence and the SAF in any way to ensure safe training," he added.

"On the contrary, it compels Mindef and the SAF to do all that is humanly possible to prevent training deaths for NS men because we are fully aware that precious sons have been entrusted to us by their families," he added.

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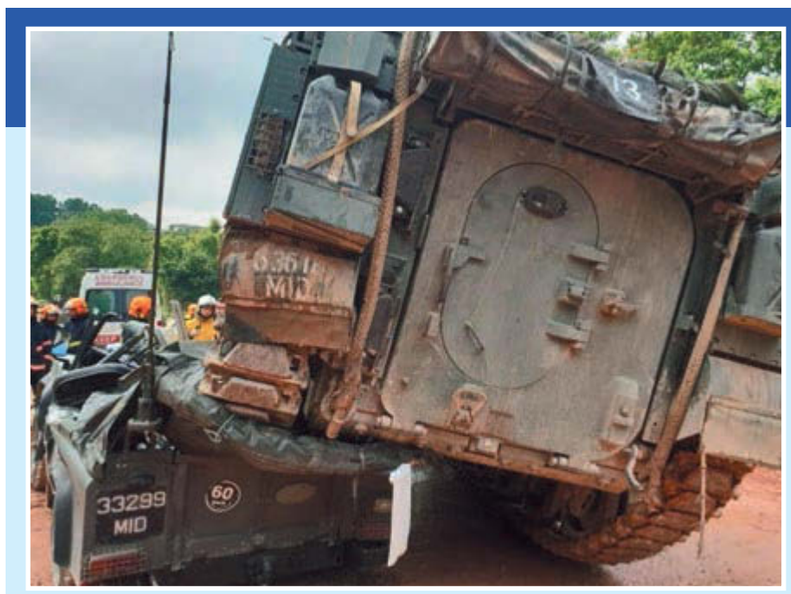

The collision of a Bionix armoured vehicle and a Land Rover which led to the death of Corporal First Class Liu Kai last November.

Action plan

- Inspector-General's Office (IGO) to be set up in the first half of this year to ensure safety compliance and culture. It will be headed by Chief of Staff-Joint Staff, who will report to the Permanent Secretary (Defence) and the Chief of Defence Force.
- Unit commanders who do not meet safety standards or who commit safety lapses will be marked in their performance reviews even if accidents do not occur.
- More safety measures will be added to Bionix vehicles, including more emergency horn buttons and rear-view cameras.
- Army will conduct safety table-top exercises for all high-risk, non-live-firing exercises.
- More regulars have been added as trainers to supervise and train national servicemen.

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New Bill seeks major update to 150-year-old Penal Code

Singapore's criminal law framework will undergo a major update to give better protection to vulnerable victims and target emerging crimes, under the Criminal Law Reform Bill introduced in Parliament yesterday by Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Amrin Amin.

The Bill seeks to put in place harsher punishments for people who commit crimes against vulnerable victims, such as children under 14 and those in close or intimate relationships with their offenders.

The Bill also seeks to update the 150-year-old Penal Code by tackling new offences with specific provisions for crimes involving voyeurism, sexual exposure and child abuse material. These offences are now dealt within a "patchwork" of existing laws not designed to address the specific crimes, said the Home Affairs Ministry.

SEE TOP OF THE NEWS A8

Thai Princess ruled out of next month's election

Thailand's Election Commission has dropped Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya, King Maha Vajiralongkorn's elder sister, from a list of nominees for prime minister for next month's election.

The fate of the Thai Raksa Chart Party, which tried to nominate the 67-year-old Princess as its candidate for prime minister, is also uncertain. The party is linked to fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The general election on March 24 will be Thailand's first since a military coup in 2014 toppled an elected Thaksin-linked government.

SEE WORLD A10

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10 must-reads for today

1 Maids' service recognised
Nineteen pairs of foreign domestic workers and employers received the Long Service Award at an awards ceremony to honour foreign domestic workers who have worked in the same household for at least 10 years. The longest-serving recipient of the award, organised by the Association of Employment Agencies (Singapore), has been working for the family for 28 years. HOME B7

Award recipient Maria Aida Procalla Somejo (in pink), 59, joining in a lo hei session with her employer's daughter, Ms Choo Yuen Ling (second from left), 30, and other guests at the ceremony yesterday. Ms Somejo, who is from the Philippines, has been working for the Choo family for 28 years. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

2 New SAF safety measures
Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen announced new safety measures yesterday as he shed more light on the recent deaths of two Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) national servicemen in his speech in Parliament, where training deaths and safety standards in the SAF came under close scrutiny. MPs had filed 20 questions on the matter. TOP OF THE NEWS A1

3 Najib's trial postponed
A Malaysian court yesterday postponed the corruption trial of former prime minister Najib Razak over charges related to state fund 1MDB, pending an appeal. Najib has pleaded not guilty to 10 charges of criminal breach of trust, money laundering and abuse of power. His trial was originally set to begin today. WORLD A11

4 Showcasing S'pore lo hei
The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre has taken the Chinese New Year practice of tossing raw fish, or lo hei, to a shopping mall in downtown Shanghai. The cultural centre marked the seventh day of the new year by serving multiple plates of yusheng on a long table inside the mall for mall staff and shoppers to enjoy. WORLD A12

5 Useful lessons from history
From forecasting to avoiding errors in geopolitical calculation, a proper study of history can be a good guide to the future, says Nanyang Technological University associate professor Scott Anthony. OPINION A16

6 Rentals for SEHC hawkers
Hawkers pay rents ranging from $750 to $3,700 a month – or a median rent of $2,000 a month – at the seven socially conscious enterprise hawker centres (SEHCs), said Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources Amy Khor. This was comparable with the $1,700 median rent at similar hawker centres. HOME B5

7 NS defaulter jailed 7 weeks
Zaley Cheng Xi Xiong fled Singapore in 2014 because he was afraid of getting injured during national service training. Cheng, 25, pleaded guilty to remaining outside Singapore without a valid exit permit for more than three years and was sentenced to seven weeks in jail yesterday. HOME B7

8 Wirecard clients seek info
Several Singapore clients of global payments giant Wirecard are hoping for clarity amid allegations of accounting fraud by the German firm. Police raided Wirecard's premises last Friday. BUSINESS C1

9 Key match for Man United
Manchester United will not sit back when Paris Saint-Germain visit Old Trafford for the first leg of their Champions League last-16 clash today, manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has said. The match will be his first European test, and progress in the Champions League would reinforce the case for the 45-year-old Norwegian to be named United's permanent manager. SPORT C10

10 S'porean girl plays Matilda
Singaporean Sofia Poston (below) is one of four young actresses playing Matilda in the award-winning musical which makes its Singapore debut on Feb 21. The nine-year-old was spotted by Matilda's creative team when she took on a small role in the musical Evita, which ran in Singapore last year. LIFE D4

ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOONG

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VIDEO
Conductor's NY debut
Mr Wong Kah Chun, 32, is the first Singaporean to conduct the New York Philharmonic – one of the world's top orchestras – and likens the experience to driving a Rolls-Royce.
http://str.sg/kahchun

VIDEO
Eco-friendly escape
Life on Song Saa, a luxury resort located off the coast of Cambodia, is languid, with clocks set to island time. The resort also adopts eco-friendly practices such as recycling and building with sustainable materials.
http://str.sg/song-saa

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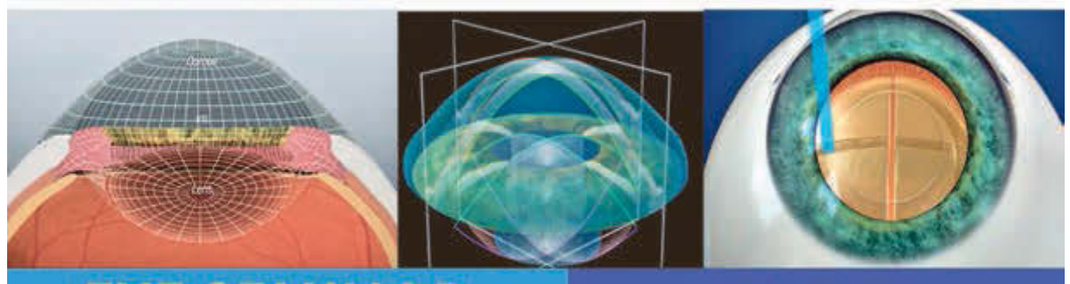

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Bionix kept reversing despite repeated calls to stop

COI and police looking into communications equipment used, says Defence Minister

Lim Min Zhang

The Bionix armoured vehicle which collided into the Land Rover driven by Corporal First Class Liu Kai, leading to his death, did not stop reversing despite repeated commands for its driver to do so, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen told Parliament yesterday.

The Land Rover also stopped about 10m closer behind the Bionix Infantry Fighting Vehicle than the stipulated safety distance of 30m, before the Bionix started reversing, said Dr Ng.

An independent Committee of Inquiry (COI), as well as the police, are looking into whether the communications equipment used by the Bionix crew was working properly at the time, he said, adding that the servicemen involved have been redeployed to non-operational roles.

The minister was sharing the preliminary findings of the COI, which was convened to look into the incident.

Dr Ng said the COI was able to piece together a "detailed chronology" from the recordings of the Land Rover's front and in-vehicle cameras, and statements from multiple witnesses.

CFC Liu, 22, was a transport operator from the Singapore Armed Forces' Transport Hub West. On the day of the accident, he was assigned to drive an assessor from the Active Unit Training Centre – a regular captain – who was the Land Rover's vehicle commander.

The Bionix vehicle's crew of four, all full-time national servicemen, were from the 42nd Battalion Singapore Armoured Regiment.

On Nov 3 last year, the exercise had commenced at 7am at the Jalan Murai training area. Just before 10am, the Bionix crew spotted several vehicles involved in the exercise passing a junction ahead of it.

The armoured vehicle then stopped, as ordered by its vehicle commander. So did the Land Rover, which was following the Bionix to assess the crew's performance.

The trainer instructed CFC Liu to overtake the Bionix, but the latter heard shots fired as part of the exercise as he moved forward. He stopped the Land Rover at a maximum distance of 19.8m, based on the COI's calculations, from the Bionix. The safe distance stipulated is 30m, and it was the job of the Land Rover's vehicle commander to ensure this, the COI noted.

Four seconds after the Land Rover stopped, the Bionix crew reversed the vehicle to execute the extrication drill ordered by the Bionix commander, as a response to the gunshots. Almost immediately after the Bionix started reversing, the rear guide was seen gesturing at the Land Rover to move away. He was also seen pushing the microphone of his Combat Vehicle Crew (CVC) helmet closer to his mouth. He repeatedly issued stop commands, but the Bionix kept reversing.

A slight steer on the part of the vehicle operator brought the Land Rover into the path of the reversing Bionix. Both CFC Liu and the trainer had shouted and gestured with their hands for the Bionix to stop, and the trainer also tried to reach for the handset of the radio set to communicate with the Bionix crew.

But about eight seconds after it started reversing, the armoured vehicle hit the Land Rover and mounted the driver's side before stopping. CFC Liu was trapped, but the trainer managed to extricate himself. The exercise was immediately stopped. Dr Ng said: "The COI noted that the intercom system was working earlier in the exercise. They have asked for an independent technical assessment report on whether the intercom system was working properly all the time."

The intercom via the CVC helmet is the rear guide's only means of communications with other crew members in the Bionix, he said, adding that police probes are also focused on the communications between the Bionix crew, and whether this was affected by the equipment.

CFC Liu died from his injuries at about 10.35am. The cause of his death was traumatic asphyxia, said Dr Ng.

Dr Ng said that CFC Liu was a well-liked and respected soldier who served with pride.

"We mourn the loss of this precious son. And we hope that the measures we have put in place will prevent a similar incident from reoccurring," he said.

The cause of Corporal First Class Liu Kai's death was traumatic asphyxia, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen.

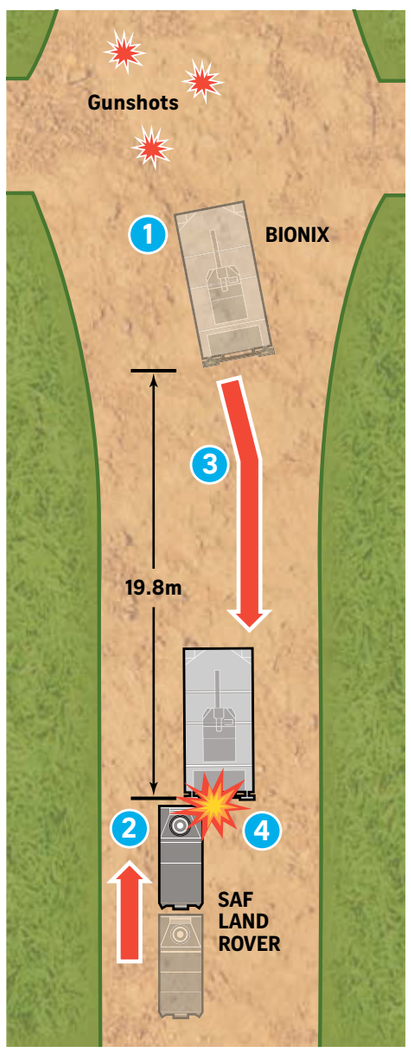
mzlim@sph.com.sg

Sequence of events leading to CFC Liu Kai's death

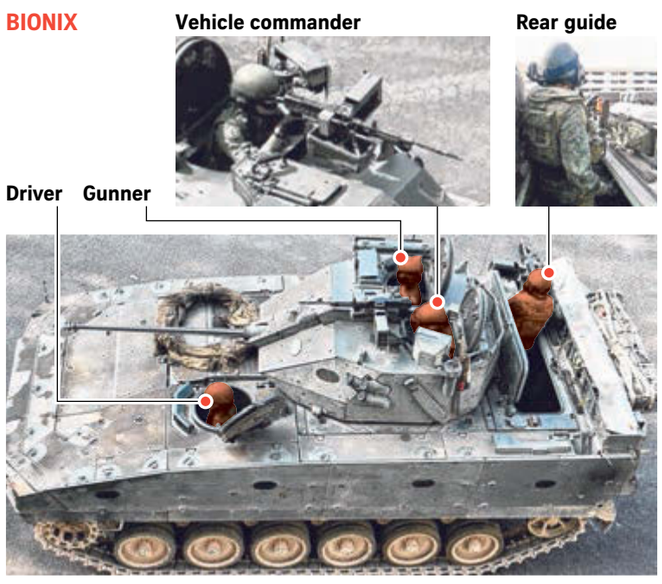
Before a Bionix armoured vehicle mounted a Land Rover and killed Corporal First Class Liu Kai on Nov 3 last year, both vehicles were closer to each other than allowed under the safety distance rules. There appeared to be a communication breakdown between personnel in both vehicles and the Bionix failed to stop reversing further.

HOW IT HAPPENED

1. At around 9.58am, the Bionix stops ahead of a junction after spotting other vehicles passing by. Trailing behind is a Land Rover driven by Corporal First Class Liu Kai, which also stops at this point.
2. CFC Liu moves the Land Rover forward, upon hearing the vehicle commander's instructions to overtake the Bionix, and stops the vehicle after hearing gun shots fired as part of the exercise. This leaves it 19.8m behind the Bionix, which is less than the safety distance of 30m.
3. Four seconds later, the Bionix starts to reverse as part of an extrication drill in response to the gun shots fired. As the Bionix driver steers the vehicle slightly to correct a "drift" in its reverse direction, it finds the Land Rover in its path.
4. The Bionix continues its reverse manoeuvre until it mounts the Land Rover on the driver's side.



CREW POSITIONS



SAF LAND ROVER

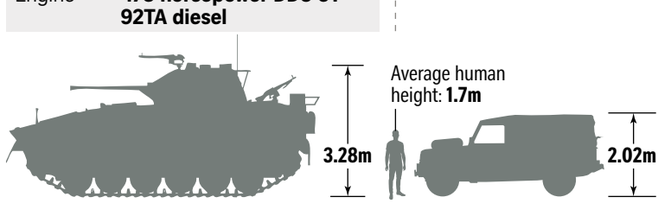
SPECIFICATIONS

BIONIX

Width	3.87m
Speed	74kmh
Weight	24 tonnes (combat loaded)
Armament	0.5 inch M2 machine gun or MK 19 40 automatic grenade launcher
Engine	475 horsepower DDC 6Y 92TA diesel

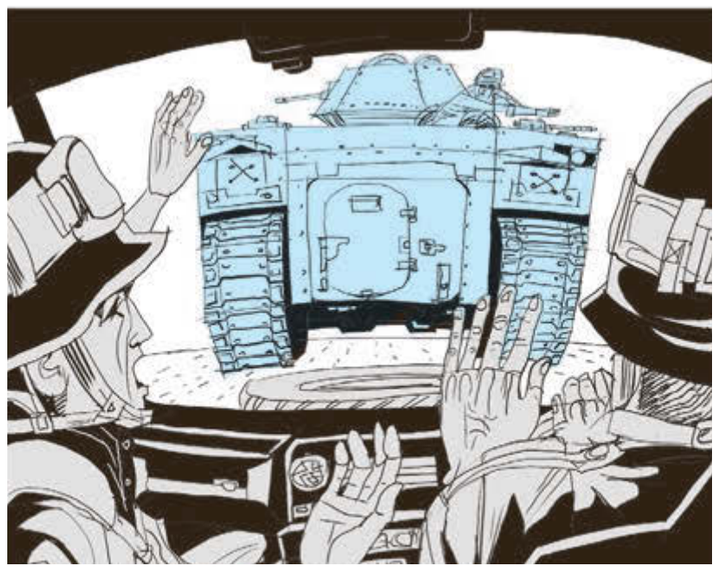
SAF LAND ROVER

Width	1.79m
Length	4.64m
Kerb weight	2,062kg
Top speed	145kmh
Power	122bhp
Engine capacity	2,198cc

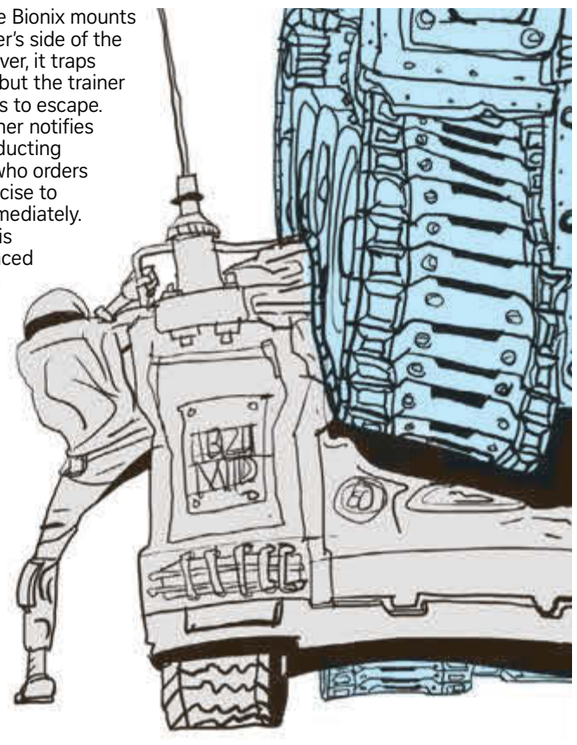


1 Almost immediately after the Bionix begins reversing, a rear guide in the armoured vehicle gestures at the Land Rover driven by Corporal First Class Liu Kai to move away, pushing the microphone of his helmet closer to his mouth. He repeatedly tells the Bionix driver to stop but to no avail.

2 Seeing the reversing Bionix, the trainer in the Land Rover taps CFC Liu and signals for him to reverse the vehicle away from the oncoming Bionix. Both of them shout and gesture at the armoured vehicle to stop. The trainer also tries to grab the radio set to communicate with the Bionix crew.



3 After the Bionix mounts the driver's side of the Land Rover, it traps CFC Liu but the trainer manages to escape. The trainer notifies the conducting officer, who orders the exercise to stop immediately. CFC Liu is pronounced dead on site.



Source: MINDEF PHOTOS: MINDEF, ST FILE ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Rear-view cameras, more emergency horn buttons for Bionix vehicles

The Singapore Army has put in place a series of safety measures, including for vehicular training, after the incident that led to Corporal First Class Liu Kai's death last November, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen told Parliament yesterday.

These include installing additional emergency horn buttons and rear-view cameras in the Bionix armoured vehicles.

A Bionix Infantry Fighting Vehicle had mounted the Land Rover that CFC Liu was driving during a field training exercise in the Jalan Murai training area, trapping him and leading to his death.

This reversing took place despite repeated commands by the Bionix rear guide for it to stop, Dr Ng revealed yesterday.

The measures were announced as part of Dr Ng's ministerial statement on recent deaths in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), including more details about the circumstances surrounding the death of CFC (NS) Aloysius Pang last month.

Dr Ng said that now, for all Bionix reversing manoeuvres, the driver can move the vehicle backwards only with the explicit clearance by the rear guide, and trainers will now be in the combat vehicles during "high-risk" training instead of being in Land Rovers.

"These two measures together, with the extra emergency horn buttons, will enhance safety and still allow armour units to practise extrication drills," said Dr Ng.

Dr Ng said the SAF will also put a number of measures in place to prevent the recurrence of similar incidents in the future.

From next month, the Bionix training fleet will be retrofitted with a rear-view camera system in phases, and this will be completed by 2020.

The system provides a live video feed of the vehicle's rear to enhance the operator's situational awareness while in the vehicle during training and operations.

It is capable of operating in a low-light environment, with the video displayed on the 16.5cm-wide display panel mounted in the operator's compartment.

The army will study if these new features for the Bionix vehicles ought to be incorporated for the operational vehicles as well, he said.

In addition, all heavy-wheeled vehicles such as five-tonners will have rear-view cameras and mirrors installed to reduce blind spots.

Since last November, all Bionix vehicles used for training have had three emergency horns, up from one, and the vehicle's rear guide can use them as an additional way of alerting the operator and those outside the vehicle of any hazards or obstacles.

When a horn is sounded, the Bionix's operator has to stop the vehicle immediately.

More regular trainers have been added as trainers, and they will no longer just be in Land Rovers, said Dr Ng. Instead, they will be required to be in the combat vehicles with the trainees during "high-risk" training.

The army will ensure that only essential vehicles are allowed in the exercise area to minimise the risk of accidents, he said.

He added that the newly announced Inspector-General's Office, which is tasked with ensuring compliance with safety rules and promoting safety culture in the SAF, will review whether further mitigating measures are needed to help operationally ready national servicemen (NSmen) adjust from civilian life to in-camp training.

This was in response to MPs who asked if NSmen are familiar with their tasks.

Dr Ng said: "Ultimately, safety is both a command and individual responsibility, and everyone needs to play their part because precious lives depend on it."

Lim Min Zhang

SCAN TO WATCH Enhanced safety measures for Bionix vehicles. http://str.sg/bionix

LEADERS MUST SET EXAMPLE

Commanders and supervisors must lead by example in emphasising safety, and must know that safety lapses will affect their performance review... Soldiers must have a strong respect for safety rules, take care of one another and speak out on safety concerns. Incentives and disincentives must be aligned to achieve the right safety outcomes. Our safety systems must weed out unsafe practices, even when they do not lead to accidents.

DEFENCE MINISTER NG ENG HEN

Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said soldiers can flag risky behaviour and safety breaches to their superiors without fear of reprisal, and any soldier regardless of rank can call for an immediate stop to training if he spots safety breaches or unsafe practices. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Unit commanders will be penalised for safety lapses

Minister stresses need to have strong safety culture in all units to ensure zero fatalities

Lim Min Zhang

Unit commanders who do not meet safety standards or who are responsible for safety lapses will see this reflected in their performance reviews even if accidents do not occur, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said in Parliament yesterday.

He made this point as he re-emphasised the need to have a strong safety culture in all units and safety consciousness "down to the last soldier", if the target of zero fatalities during national service training is to be achieved.

Dr Ng was giving a ministerial statement in response to 20 questions filed by MPs on recent training deaths, as well as safety measures taken by the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).

In his speech, Dr Ng also provided the preliminary findings into Corporal First Class (CFC) Liu Kai's death last November, and more details about the incident that led to CFC (NS) Aloysius Pang's death last month.

On commanders who do not meet safety standards, the minister said: "Let me emphasise that such commanders will be marked as having performed unsatisfactorily even if accidents have not occurred. This is the right emphasis to prevent accidents."

He added: "Commanders and supervisors must lead by example in emphasising safety, and must know that safety lapses will affect their performance review... Soldiers must have a strong respect for safety rules, take care of one another and speak out on safety concerns.

"Incentives and disincentives must be aligned to achieve the right safety outcomes. Our safety systems must weed out unsafe practices, even when they do not lead to accidents."

He said that in the past three years, an average of 2 per cent of servicemen a year had been punished under the SAF Act for safety lapses. Apart from fines and detentions, they had faced administrative penalties such as delayed promotions and reduced benefits.

On the other hand, servicemen who demonstrate good behaviour are rewarded, and units and individuals are recognised during the different services' annual Safety Day.

Dr Ng refuted the notion that safe training cannot go hand in hand with realistic training.

"If we have a strong safety culture and safety systems, it will give soldiers greater confidence to train hard and realistically.

"SAF commanders are convinced that it can be done, and these measures I have outlined today will lead us to that goal of achieving zero training fatalities," he said.

He said soldiers can highlight risky behaviour and safety breaches to their superiors without fear of reprisal, and any soldier regardless of rank can call for an immediate stop to training if he has spotted safety breaches or unsafe practices.

Servicemen can also report safety incidents and near-misses through a 24-hour safety hotline, which has received about 140 calls a year.

After the speech, Non-Constituency MP Dennis Tan asked what level of unit commanders – such as those at the battalion or formation levels – will be penalised when there are safety breaches.

Dr Ng said in response that there are independent personnel outside the SAF and the Defence Ministry (Mindef) looking at the issues, and "if they decide that a change of the most senior leadership makes a difference, it is up to them to recommend".

"I think we want to be careful that we do what we think works and makes a difference.

"For Mindef and the SAF, we want to deal with day-to-day issues, aligning our incentives and disincentives so we get the whole system moving and making sure that the effect is felt on the ground rather than posturing or politicking."

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang GRC) asked whether there is a need for training to be halted across the board if an incident is a result of human error rather than systemic lapses.

Dr Ng noted that many people who comment on such safety issues are also servicemen themselves. "And if you think that the system has degraded to a point, point out where it is and we will fix it," he said.

"But if we are experiencing injuries and deaths as a result of, as you say, human error, then neither should we punish indiscriminately even those who are not involved.

"That does not bring anyone any comfort or positive results. Deal with the issue, strengthen the system bit by bit, and it will take years," he added.

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Not possible to outsource all maintenance work: Minister

Basic maintenance is done by NS technicians so that equipment can function during operations

Lim Min Zhang

It is not possible to outsource all maintenance work for heavy vehicles and machinery, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said in Parliament yesterday.

Dr Ng was giving a ministerial statement on recent training deaths in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), including that of Singapore actor and operationally ready national serviceman (NSman) Aloysius Pang last month.

Later, in response to a question from Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied GRC), Dr Ng added that the military leadership is relooking its involvement in "non-operational" activities such as the National Day Parade and Army Half Marathon events.

Corporal First Class (CFC) Pang, 28, was an armament technician from the 268th Battalion Singapore Artillery who was carrying out repair works inside the Singapore Self-Propelled Howitzer when he was seriously injured as the gun barrel was lowered.

And last November, CFC Liu Kai, 22, died after a Bionix armoured vehicle reversed and mounted the Land Rover he was driving.

Following the incident that led to CFC Pang's death, members of the public suggested reducing the need for NSmen to perform maintenance of heavy machinery, such as artillery guns and armoured vehicles.

RELOOKING RESPONSIBILITIES

> **This is a command decision. The Chief of Defence Force, commanders, the commanding officers of the units must themselves... decide which is the tempo.**
>
> **DEFENCE MINISTER NG ENG HEN**, on allowing units to focus on safety by relooking administrative aspects that deter from this.

In his speech, Dr Ng said NS technicians are required to be with their units to perform basic maintenance so that the equipment can function during operations.

Maintenance work that is complex and requires specialised tools and equipment is outsourced.

In CFC Pang's case, he was part of his battalion's Forward Maintenance Platoon, made up of national servicemen, said Dr Ng.

The platoon provides basic maintenance support, with more complex maintenance tasks performed by regular technicians, called the Forward Support Group.

After Dr Ng's speech, Mr Singh asked whether "non-operational responsibilities" of NSmen and full-time national servicemen (NSFs) such as organisation of the annual National Day Parade and the Army Half Marathon events could be outsourced, for example, to the private sector.

He asked: "To that extent, is Mindef, as part of this safety review, looking into the time NSFs and NSmen actually have to focus on training, maintenance and other operational responsibilities?"

Dr Ng replied that he agreed with Mr Singh that "we want to be careful as we are moving in this safety journey to allow time for units to focus on safety".

And if there are "administrative aspects" that deter from this, the SAF should be prepared to relook this, he said.

"But this is a command decision. The Chief of Defence Force, commanders, the commanding officers of the units must themselves... decide which is the tempo.

"And you are quite right; for certain activities they have relooked it. I leave it to them to announce what they are not going to do so that it gives them enough bandwidth to focus on safety."

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SAF personnel carrying the coffin of Corporal First Class Aloysius Pang (above) into Mandai Crematorium last month. Following the incident that led to CFC Pang's death, members of the public had suggested reducing the need for NSmen to perform maintenance of heavy machinery, such as artillery guns and armoured vehicles. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

FromTheGallery

Response from society must not weaken support for NS

Kor Kian Beng

Defence & Security Editor

As MPs and Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen debated the issue of training safety in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) in Parliament yesterday, the State Courts heard the case of a Singaporean who defaulted on his national service obligations apparently due to fears he had about getting injured.

According to the prosecution in the case, Zaley Cheng Xi Xiong, who had medical issues, was so afraid of sustaining injuries during NS training that he fled Singapore in 2014. He returned only in August 2017 after graduating from an Australian university.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Kwang Jia Min of Cheng said: "He heard stories about national service and was afraid of sustaining injuries during national service training. As such, the accused decided to leave Singapore so as to evade national service."

Cheng, 25, was jailed for seven weeks yesterday after pleading guilty to having remained outside Singapore without a valid exit permit for more than three years. The court case was not about whether Cheng's concerns were justified. He broke the law. In doing so, he evaded an obligation that all fit and healthy 18-year-olds here have to undertake.

The timing of the case was coincidental, but it came on the back of a series of unfortunate and unnecessary training accidents – a spate of five fatalities in the last 17 months, each one adding to concerns, raising questions and inviting a response from the SAF about whether training safety standards were slipping.

It has been important each time that the SAF outlined what it was doing to improve safety standards and processes because public support for NS was at risk of being eroded.

The latest incident involved Corporal First Class (NS) Aloysius Pang, a 28-year-old home-grown actor who died on Jan 23, four days after suffering serious injuries from being crushed when the gun barrel of a self-propelled howitzer was lowered.

Following the death of CFC Pang, the public chorus of concerns over the adequacy of systems and processes to ensure training safety in the SAF intensified. Questions and comments were also raised, especially on social media, as to why there was a need for the SAF to train so hard when Singapore is not at war or under perceivable threats from known adversaries.

The debate on some of these issues was reflected in the House yesterday. For instance, the opposition Workers' Party (WP) chief Pritam Singh described the SAF's goal of having zero training fatalities as "not only unrealistic but also wishful", given the inherent risks in training a military force that must be ready to defend the country at a moment's notice or whenever called on to do so.

"As a result of the expectations created, every time a training fatality occurs, the public pressure on Mindef and SAF commanders down the leadership chain takes on a very corrosive edge. This damages not just the SAF, but the institution of national service too," added Mr Singh.

Dr Ng acknowledged that while the goal of zero fatalities is a very difficult target, it is one that can be achieved in some years.

Also, it is a goal the SAF must set to ensure that the zero-fatality aim "sears into the consciousness of every commander and every soldier" such that they are careful about their actions and know that safety lapses will not be tolerated, he added.

The question of whether senior members of the Ministry of Defence and the SAF should face disciplinary action following training incidents also came up yesterday.

WP Non-Constituency MP Dennis Tan asked if the policy of "marking" unit commanders for safety lapses even when accidents do not occur would also apply higher up – such as at the division formation level.

He cited how defence ministers and military commanders overseas quit or were removed from their posts over training fatalities.

Responding, Dr Ng said the removal of senior leaders is a possibility, depending on whether they were involved or were derelict in their duties, or if an external panel concluded that a change at the top would make a difference.

But he warned against punishing indiscriminately even those who were not involved.

"That does not bring anyone any comfort or positive results. Deal with the issue, strengthen the system bit by bit, and it will take years," he said, adding that the best-run organisations are not those that are on tenterhooks, where staff are fearful of reprisals and dare not do anything.

The debate in the House showed the dilemma policymakers face in tackling the issue of training safety.

There are no easy answers nor easy solutions.

From the slew of new measures to boost safety that Dr Ng revealed yesterday and rolled out by the SAF since the recent training deaths, there is little doubt that the authorities are serious in tackling the problem.

True, there are areas where Mindef and SAF can improve on to maintain public trust, such as in prompt communication after a training incident, and in providing clear information that does not give rise to more questions.

But it is also imperative for the public to be realistic and pragmatic in the debate over SAF training safety – and, crucially, over the importance of NS towards national defence. If there is public consensus that the SAF needs to train hard to provide Singapore with the deterrent factor, then it is inevitable to also conclude that training incidents resulting in injuries and death may occur.

Despite the best efforts of the SAF and individuals, no one can guarantee any system and process that are able to prevent training incidents, especially if there are human errors or lapses.

So, while the response from the Government and the SAF matters, there must also be an appropriate response from the society lest it weakens public support for NS and, in turn, for Singapore's national defence through calls for measures that could, instead, yield results that are counter-productive.

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Ng Eng Hen to Pritam: Zero fatalities hard to attain, but must still be SAF's aim

Adrian Lim
Political Correspondent

The Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) goal of zero training fatalities "sears into the consciousness" of every commander and soldier the importance of training safely in peacetime and signals that safety lapses will not be tolerated, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen told the House.

And while this target is a difficult one to attain – it was achieved in some years and there is no guarantee that it can be done in others – the SAF still has to aim for it, he added in Parliament yesterday.

"Which mother, shall we say, can lose her son?" Dr Ng said in reply to Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh (Aljunied GRC), who said SAF's zero-fatality goal was unrealistic.

Mr Singh, who filed an adjournment motion on national service, said: "As a result of the expectations created, every time a training fatality occurs, the public pressure on the Ministry of Defence and SAF commanders down the leadership chain takes on a very corrosive edge."

"This damages not just the SAF, but the institution of national service too," he added in an 18-minute speech covering training safety and operational readiness in the SAF.

There have been four training-related deaths since September 2017 – the most recent on Jan 23, when actor Aloysius Pang died after being injured in an accident during a military exercise in New Zealand.

Mr Singh, 42, who is an operationally ready national serviceman in the army's combat engineers and holds the rank of major, said that following Mr Pang's death, Mindef's narrative appeared to have shifted towards a zero-accident mindset.

And while national servicemen understand what this means – that Mindef takes safety seriously – the public focuses on the word "zero". A zero-fatality goal is one that cannot be achieved, even in industries with notoriously strict safety standards like aviation, Mr Singh said.

Dr Ng replied that Mr Singh was "right, in a way", but he had come to the view the SAF should aim for zero fatalities, based on the experiences of SAF's own commanders.

Dr Ng referred to a speech by former defence chief Bey Soo Khiang last year during a safety symposium, where he talked about how the goal of zero accidents started.

Mr Bey, who was also air force chief from 1992 to 1995, said the Republic of Singapore Air Force's grim accident record in its first 20 years prompted him to think hard on whether it had lost sight of its mission of deterrence.

Dr Ng cited Mr Bey as saying: "Each accident erodes deterrence... Even before we started fighting the war, we had already lost 50 fighters, so our peacetime exchange ratio with respect to our potential threats must look quite bad. At the individual level, the whole idea of training in peacetime is to deter and when deterrence fails, be there on the first wave. But you will not be there if you kill yourself during training. Then the training is in vain."

MOUNTING PRESSURE

> As a result of the expectations created, every time a training fatality occurs, the public pressure on the Ministry of Defence and SAF commanders down the leadership chain takes on a very corrosive edge. This damages not just the SAF, but the institution of national service too.
>
> WORKERS' PARTY CHIEF PRITAM SINGH

Dr Ng also responded to Mr Singh's suggestion to review Section 14 of the Government Proceedings Act, which protects armed forces personnel and the Government from civil suits. Mr Singh said the law could be tweaked so immunity is waived, where a commander "behaves recklessly, maliciously or displays a wilful disregard for safety considerations" during training. He said such a change would serve to protect the institution of NS by making it more accountable.

But Dr Ng said there is accountability for commanders and NSmen, with those who have been derelict or who have not done their duty criminally prosecuted. "Not just civilian payouts in the courts. They go to jail. Their lives, in that sense, and careers are ruined. And justly so if they deserve it," he said.

Mr Singh also gave several suggestions, such as tapping experienced officers, warrant officers and specialists who are retiring, and hiring them as members of safety-related outfits in the SAF.

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Inspections find no malfunction in howitzer's mechanism

Actor who died and two other experienced crew had done similar maintenance before: Minister

Lim Min Zhang

Inspections did not detect any malfunction of the lowering mechanism of the Singapore Self-Propelled Howitzer (SSPH) gun barrel that crushed Singapore actor Aloysius Pang and led to his death, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen told Parliament yesterday.

The two other servicemen in the howitzer's cabin with Corporal First Class (NS) Pang, 28, were experienced in SSPH maintenance.

One of them is an operationally ready national serviceman (NSman) with the rank of Third Sergeant, who performed the role of gun detachment commander, and the other is a regular who is an armament technician and holds the rank of Military Expert 2. Both of them have been redeployed from their operational roles.

CFC Pang, an armament technician, died four days after suffering injuries on Jan 19 during a military exercise in New Zealand.

Dr Ng said this crew had been trained specifically on the SSPH and had conducted similar maintenance works on it in the past, adding that during the exercise in New Zealand last month, checks were done on the guns daily.

The Defence Minister was giving a ministerial statement in response to more than 10 questions filed by MPs relating to the incident and to training deaths in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) in the last two years.

Dr Ngsaid he would only state facts in reply to the questions and "consciously not draw any inferences or conclusions on the incident involving CFC Pang", as he called for the need to be sensitive to the family's feelings.

On Jan 19, CFC Pang was doing repair work on the gun's calibration system for accurate firing inside the SSPH when he could not get out of the way of the gun barrel in time as it was being lowered.

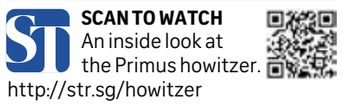
Following the incident, Dr Ng said the SAF's "immediate task" was to ensure that there was no "systemic machine malfunction of the SSPH", as this would put other maintenance crew members at risk.

"Inspections of the SSPH have not detected any machine malfunction of the gun-lowering mechanism," he said.

Dr Ng said the regular armament technician in the cabin with CFC Pang had been in service for more than 16 years, with eight years of working experience on the SSPH. It was also his sixth time participating as a technician in Exercise Thunder Warrior – which CFC Pang was participating in.

ENSURING SAFETY

> We owe it to CFC (NS) Pang and his family, indeed to all Singaporeans, to get to the bottom of what happened, and make things right, to ensure the safety of the NS training system as a whole.
>
> DEFENCE MINISTER NG ENG HEN



SCAN TO WATCH
An inside look at the Primus howitzer.
http://str.sg/howitzer

The gun commander was on his eighth in-camp training and had undergone refresher training prior to his deployment in the exercise, said Dr Ng. Both personnel were not named.

The SSPH's gun barrel is usually tilted upwards for firing but needs to be lowered for some types of maintenance work, he said.

When fully lowered, the rear end of the gun goes up and ends about 10cm below the top rim of the cabin, but there is still adequate space for people within the cabin to be in their various safe positions.

Dr Ng said: "No one should be behind the barrel when (the) gun is being lowered.

"Unfortunately, CFC (NS) Pang was caught between the gun barrel and the interior of the SSPH as the gun barrel was lowered, and (he) sustained compression injuries to his chest and abdominal areas."

In the incident, Dr Ng said CFC Pang, who was first activated, requested and received help from regular technicians as he was unable to resolve the fault. He added that the actor, along with the two others, were familiar with the safety procedures that are taught to all maintenance and SSPH operating crew.

The regular technician, who is overall in-charge, is responsible for ensuring that the gun has been lowered and fixed in place before any maintenance work can begin, said Dr Ng.

The minister also responded to a question by Non-Constituency MP Daniel Goh, who asked whether the design of the SSPH will be reviewed to determine possible flaws.

Dr Ng said the SSPH had undergone extensive trials and evaluations before its introduction in 2003, and other militaries – such as those of the United States, South Korea and Germany – also operate tracked 155mm guns with similar gun-lowering mechanisms.

He added: "We owe it to CFC(NS) Pang and his family, indeed to all Singaporeans, to get to the bottom of what happened, and make things right, to ensure the safety of the NS training system as a whole."

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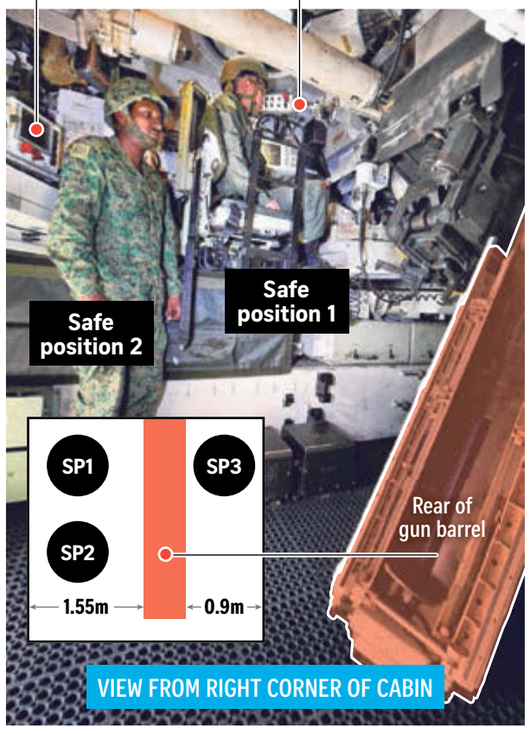
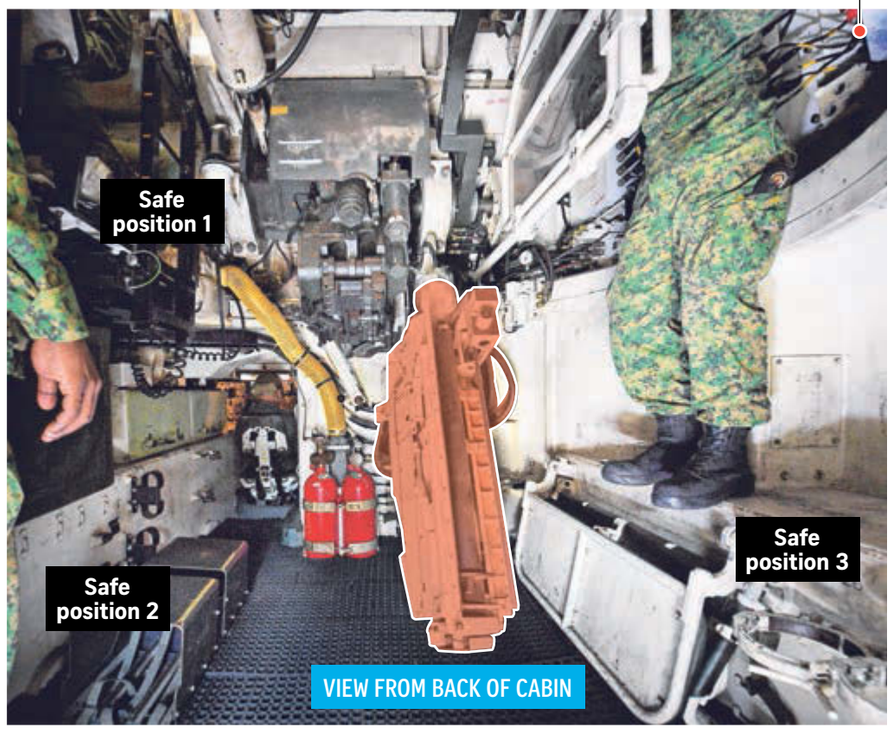
Safety measures in the howitzer's cabin

The two other servicemen in the cabin of the Singapore Self-Propelled Howitzer (SSPH) with Corporal First Class (NS) Aloysius Pang were experienced in SSPH maintenance, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen in Parliament yesterday. He also outlined the safety features of the SSPH and said it has been inspected for any malfunction of the gun barrel's lowering mechanism.

INSIDE THE HOWITZER'S CABIN

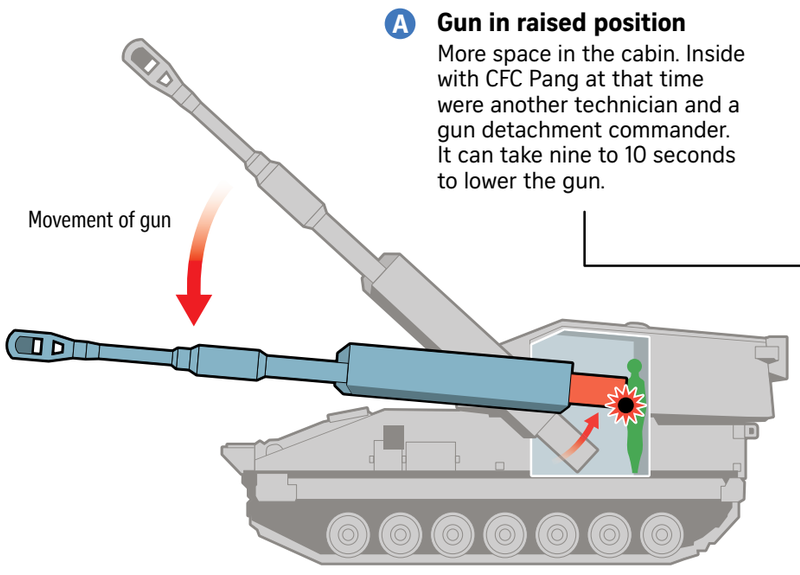
Buttons
The gun commander, charge loader or ammo loader can activate an emergency stop button located within reach of their respective operating positions. This is for emergency situations that require the gun barrel or other mechanical moving parts in the turret to immediately cease movement.



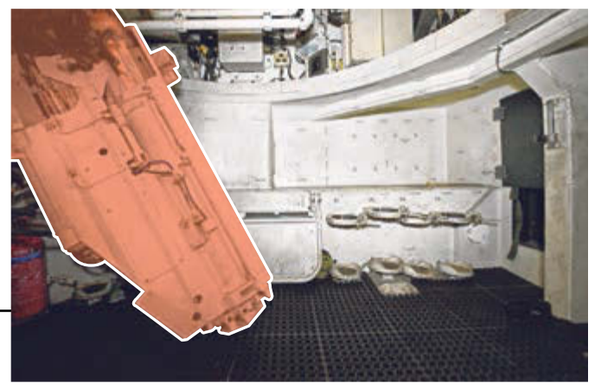


Main cabin
The cabin is divided into two by the rear end of the gun barrel. "Safe" positions are located on either sides of the gun barrel. Such safety procedures are taught to all maintenance and SSPH operating crew.

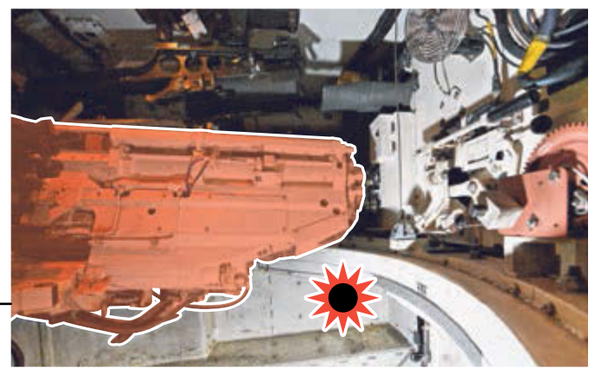
HOW IT HAPPENED



A Gun in raised position
More space in the cabin. Inside with CFC Pang at that time were another technician and a gun detachment commander. It can take nine to 10 seconds to lower the gun.



B Gun in standby /neutral position
Space in cabin reduced. CFC Pang was caught between the end of the gun barrel and the interior of the howitzer, and suffered crush injuries. The other two personnel were not injured.



Source: MINDEF TEXT: LIM MIN ZHANG PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Stiffer penalties proposed for crimes against the vulnerable

Bill also widens coverage of such victims, raises Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility

Tan Tam Mei

People who commit crimes against vulnerable victims, such as maids and disabled persons, will receive twice the maximum punishment for similar crimes against others under the new Criminal Law Reform Bill introduced in Parliament yesterday.

Currently, such offences draw 1½ times the maximum punishment for crimes under the Penal Code.

The Bill, put before the House by Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Amrin Amin, also widens the coverage of those considered vulnerable to include children younger than 14.

These are among the key provisions of the Bill, which will update the 150-year-old Penal Code "to ensure it remains relevant", the Ministry of Home Affairs said in a statement.

The last comprehensive review of the Penal Code was in 2007.

The Bill also seeks to update other legislation, such as the Criminal Procedure Code, the Children and Young Persons Act and the Women's Charter.

It draws on recommendations made by the Penal Code Review Committee last year to the Government.

The Bill also introduces several new offences to deal with emerging trends, such as voyeurism and easy access to child abuse material via the Internet.

But one of its key provisions is the widening of the scope of vulnerable victims beyond the existing two categories of domestic workers and people with mental or physical disabilities.

It will introduce three new groups: Children under the age of 14, those with whom the offender has a close relationship, and those the offender has an intimate relationship with.

Those in close relationships could include people living in the same household or those who have frequent contact with each other.

As for the definition of intimate relationships, the ministry said it will cover people who share the care and support of a child or are financially dependent on each other.

Separately, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam had disclosed last November that the Law Ministry is considering letting unmarried people in intimate relationships who are being abused to apply for protection orders faster under the Protection From Harassment Act.

The Bill also seeks to better protect vulnerable victims by introducing an offence of causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable person.

This will cover the scenario in which two or more caregivers in a household have the opportunity to cause death, but it is unclear whose act caused the death.

This provision, which would apply to the person who committed the unlawful act, as well as to someone who did nothing to stop it, makes the crime punishable with up to 20 years in jail, plus a fine or caning.

In addition, the Bill proposes to raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility from the current seven to 10, which is on a par with jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, Wales and Hong Kong.

The ministry said it had considered feedback from the social sector but did not take up its suggestion to raise the bar to age 12.

While the number of arrests of those aged seven to nine is "small", there is an "appreciable increase" in the number of juveniles arrested who are aged 10 and older, and this may require the police to intervene, said the ministry, without disclosing the figures.

This proposed change will be accompanied by the development of a rehabilitation framework to manage children between the ages of seven and 10 who commit offences.

It is only when the framework is ready that the new minimum age of criminal responsibility will come into force.

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One of its key provisions is the widening of the scope of vulnerable victims... It will introduce three new groups: Children under the age of 14, those with whom the offender has a close relationship, and those the offender has an intimate relationship with.

New Bill to better protect minors from exploitative sexual relationship

New offences covering exploitative sexual relationships with minors as well as specific laws to tackle child abuse material are among the proposals in a Bill introduced in Parliament yesterday.

The Criminal Law Reform Bill, presented by Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs Amrin Amin, will better protect minors by making it an offence to engage in sexual activity with those between 16 and 18 years of age in the context of an exploitative relationship.

The proposed offence carries a sentence of up to 15 years in jail, with a fine or caning.

Currently, the age for sexual consent is 16, but there are no provisions for penetrative sexual activity arising from an exploitative relationship for the 16-18 age group.

To determine if a relationship is exploitative, the court will consider a non-exhaustive proposed list of factors, the Home Affairs Ministry said in statement.

These include the age difference between the offender and the victim, the age of the minor, the nature of the relationship and the degree of influence the offender has over the victim.

"A large age difference may result in the victim seeing the accused as an authority figure and therefore the accused is able to exert significant influence over the victim," said the ministry, adding that other jurisdictions such as Canada have similar lists.

The proposed amendments will also set out a list of relationships that will be presumed to be exploitative, and these include that of teacher-student, doctor-patient and parent-child.

The presumption is not conclusive, but is rebuttable, and the accused has to prove he or she did not exploit the minor.

The Bill also seeks to criminalise the entire production line and possession of child abuse material, which will cover the sexual and physical abuse of children below age 16 and the depiction of minors' genitalia.

The maximum penalties for engaging in the proposed offences are a jail term ranging from five to 10 years, with a fine and caning.

There will, however, be defences for those who receive unsolicited child abuse material, provided they take reasonable steps to get rid of it.

The defences relating to legitimate purposes include possessing the materials for court proceedings or the investigation or prevention of an offence.

Excluded from the Bill are materials depicting imaginary or fictional children.

In response to queries from The Straits Times on whether fictional child abuse material – which does not harm actual children – can still feed a paedophile's inclinations, the ministry said there is "no conclusive evidence proving a link between accessing fictional images of sexual abuse and the commission of offences against children".

But the ministry stressed that possessing and distributing such images may legitimise and reinforce inappropriate views of children.

Hence, material depicting fictional children will continue to be criminalised as obscene material under the Penal Code, but with increased penalties of up to two years in jail when the material depicts minors.

The Bill also seeks to tackle the predatory conduct of adult offenders towards minors, and will criminalise the act of engaging in sexual activity before a minor, causing a minor to view sexual images, as well as sexual communication with a minor.

The changes come after the highly publicised 2017 case in which a mixed martial arts instructor committed various offences, ranging from sexual penetration of two 15-year-old girls to showing an obscene film to a six-year-old girl. Obscene films were also found in his home.

Joshua Robinson, an American expatriate, was sentenced to four years in jail, which caused public outrage over what was perceived as inadequate punishment.

Another new offence introduced in the Bill is the criminalising of the possession, production, sale and distribution of child sex dolls.

The ministry said it was in response to technological advancements that have made it easier to produce these dolls that depict actual children.

The development of child sex dolls has also sparked worldwide debate on whether they should be made illegal, with some making the case that these dolls might assuage the urges of paedophiles. The import and distribution of these dolls are now banned in countries such as Australia and Britain.

On proposing the ban on child sex dolls, the ministry said: "The Government is aware of the use of child sex dolls in other jurisdictions... (it) recognises that such material may legitimise and reinforce inappropriate views of children.

"As such, we have proposed that the possession, sale, distribution, importation, exportation and production of these child sex dolls be offences."

Tan Tam Mei

Proposed Penal Code changes include allowing men to be considered rape victims

Men can be considered victims of rape and peeping Toms, under a Bill introduced in Parliament yesterday that will amend the Penal Code.

The proposed changes under the Criminal Law Reform Bill seek to expand the definitions of rape and sexual assault to make them more gender neutral and accommodate more scenarios. There will also be new offences that tackle the act of voyeurism under the Bill.

The Bill will broaden the definition of rape to include non-consensual penetration of the anus or the mouth using one's penis.

The current law defines rape as the penetration of a woman's vagina with a man's penis without her consent.

So, at present, only women can be victims of rape. Cases involving male victims are dealt with as sexual assault by penetration. This could change.

The Bill will also widen the scope of sexual assault to include instances where a woman forces a man to penetrate her vagina, anus or mouth, with his penis. The current law tackles only situations where a woman forces a man to penetrate her with other body parts.

The proposed amendments will protect men against sexual assault by women.

Besides widening the scope of offences, the Bill will also criminalise emerging crime trends like revenge porn and voyeurism.

It also criminalises revenge porn where one distributes or threatens to distribute an intimate image, and offenders can be jailed for up to five years with a fine and caning.

The Bill will also criminalise voyeuristic acts and crack down on peeping Toms and those who take part in the supply chain of "upskirt" videos and photos.

The proposed offences will include observing or recording someone in circumstances where the person could reasonably expect privacy. Producing, possessing or distributing such recordings could also be a crime.

The maximum sentence for various voyeuristic acts could be a jail term ranging from two to five years plus possible caning or fine.

Another proposed change targets the act of flashing under the offence of sexual exposure, where the offender exposes himself to gain sexual gratification or causes distress or alarm to observers.

This will also deal with the emerging crime of "cyber flashing", where images of genitalia are sent to recipients without their consent.

Offenders found guilty of sexual exposure could face up to two years in jail and fined or caned.

The Bill also introduces a new section to clarify the types of "misconceptions of fact" that could negate consent in sexual offences.

For example, if one had given consent to sex under the misconception that it would expel an evil spirit from one's body, or that it would heal a chronic disease, such instances could impair consent.

Stealthing – a relatively new term where one covertly removes a condom when consent had been given by the other partner only for condom-protected sex – will also be dealt with.

A new provision under the Bill will criminalise situations where sexual activity is obtained by deception or false representation. This includes deception in the use of a sexually protective device or whether one is suffering from a sexually transmitted disease.

"In such cases, while consent is not legally negated... the consent obtained is compromised, and there is risk of physical harm to the victim," said the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Also, the Bill seeks to repeal marital immunity for rape and decriminalise attempted suicide.

Addressing concerns that repealing marital immunity for rape could lead to the rise of false rape allegations, the ministry said all alleged rape cases are treated with the same level of "evidential rigour". There are also safeguards to deter false reporting.

The Bill will also decriminalise attempted suicide, while maintaining that abetment of attempted suicide continues to be an offence.

Tan Tam Mei

More exams could go digital in future, says Ong Ye Kung

Positive feedback to pilot but need to consider the readiness of schools and students, he says

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

In time to come, students could take more examinations on digital devices instead of writing essays by hand, said Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

His ministry has received positive feedback from students on computer-based writing examinations that were introduced as a pilot in a few subjects, such as mother tongue and literature, he said in Parliament yesterday.

"Students can more readily cut and paste, edit their essays, move paragraphs around. They can be asked to respond to an e-mail, write a blog or social media post, which better reflects real-life situations that students will go through later in life," he said.

But such electronic exams are still some distance away, he added.

"We need to take into account the readiness of schools and students... We should not inadvertently disadvantage students who may not be exposed to computers as much as others."

Mr Ong was responding to five MPs who had asked whether the ministry had plans to introduce electronic exams or marking, and whether it was possible for all GCE exam papers to be marked locally to minimise the risk of scripts being lost in transit.

Last month, the ministry disclosed that 32 O-level Additional Mathematics Paper 2 scripts were lost on a train in Britain.

In 2017, a parcel with A-level Chemistry answer scripts from 238 Singapore students was stolen from a locked courier van en route to an examiner in Britain.

Mr Ong said that while his ministry and the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board decide on the standards and grades for national exams, Cambridge Assessment is engaged to develop and mark the GCE N-, O- and A-level exams because of its strong expertise and experience.

"This arrangement has worked well over the years," he said, adding that Cambridge Assessment uses about 2,200 professors and experienced educators from universities and higher institutions to mark the scripts.

Each year, about 1.1 million answer scripts are generated from the GCE-level examinations, with 800,000 of them marked by Cambridge Assessment. The rest – comprising Mother Tongue language, Social Studies and Coursework components – are marked locally.

Mr Ong noted that marking all the scripts locally would require "a very substantial amount of highly qualified resources".

"We need to be mindful too about the workload and well-being of our teachers," he said, as marking would take place during the school vacation period, and there is a tight timeline between the exams and the release of results.

Nominated MP Walter Theseira asked if the ministry could study the cost of arranging for local marking.

"There should be no question internationally about the credibility of our examination system if it were to be done locally. Singapore has established a good reputation in that regard, and I am confident... there should be no issue with our students and our credentials," he said.

Replying, Mr Ong said that by the end of this year, marking for all GCE exams would be shifted online so there should be less concern about losing scripts.

"I fully agree with the Member that (in terms of) Singapore's reputation in education... we are at a good position to do this ourselves, and harness the resources, to mark the papers, set the questions," added Mr Ong.

"But we are where we are too because of a certain earnestness to learn from different systems around the world and to work with different credible, reputable systems around the world.

"Cambridge helped us, raised us to this level of international reputation, so it is a collaboration that is still worthwhile keeping, while mitigating the risk of lost scripts."

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SEE HOME B2

A student collecting his O-level exam results at Serangoon Garden Secondary School last month. On the issue of exam scripts, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said that by the year end, marking for all GCE exams would be shifted online, so there should be less concern about losing scripts. ST FILE PHOTO

BEING FAIR TO ALL STUDENTS

We need to take into account the readiness of schools and students... We should not inadvertently disadvantage students who may not be exposed to computers as much as others.

EDUCATION MINISTER ONG YE KUNG, on the adoption of electronic examinations in the future.

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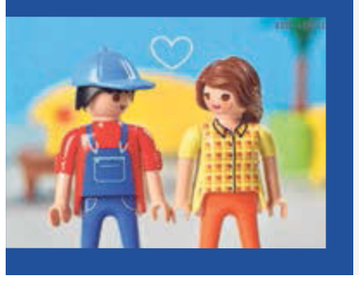

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WORLD

HAKEEM AL-ARAIBI
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Mr Srisuwan Janya (centre) of the Association for the Protection of the Constitution with his petition to the election commission to dissolve the Thai Raksa Chart Party yesterday, saying its decision to nominate Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya as prime minister has violated electoral laws. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

Thai princess disqualified from election next month

Polls body says royals must be above politics; fate of party that nominated her uncertain

Tan Hui Yee
Indochina Bureau Chief
In Bangkok

Thailand's Election Commission has ruled a princess out of next month's election as uncertainty hangs over the fate of the political party which tried to nominate her as its candidate for prime minister.

The name of Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya, King Maha Vajiralongkorn's elder sister, was left out of a list prime minister nominees released by the commission yesterday. There are 69 names, including that of current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, on the list.

"All members of the royal family have to abide by the principle of being above politics and politically neutral," it said in a statement.

Under new election laws put in place after a 2014 military coup, political parties have to submit the names of candidates they want to propose for prime minister.

Thais were stunned last Friday after the 67-year-old princess was unveiled as the candidate for the Thai Raksa Chart Party, a three-month-old party linked to fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thai Raksa Chart is a splinter party of Pheu Thai Party, which won the last election in 2011 but was ousted by the military in 2014.

TOP TRANSGRESSION

Any attempt to involve a high-level member of the royal family in the political process... would be tantamount to breaching time-honoured royal traditions, customs and national culture.

KING MAHA VAJIRALONGKORN, on the move by the Thai Raksa Chart Party to nominate Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya (left) as its candidate for prime minister in next month's election.

Although she relinquished her title in 1972, and sometimes refers to herself as a "commoner", Princess Ubolratana "has been maintaining her status as a member of the Chakri royal family", a statement by King Maha Vajiralongkorn, released last Friday night, stressed.

"Any attempt to involve a high-level member of the royal family in the political process, by whatever means, would be tantamount to breaching time-honoured royal traditions, customs and national culture. Such action must be deemed transgression and most inappropriate," it added.

Political activist Srisuwan Janya, who heads the Association for the Protection of the Constitution, yesterday filed a petition with the Election Commission to dissolve Thai Raksa Chart, saying that its actions have violated electoral laws.

If found to have violated the law, the party can be dissolved and its executives banned from politics. This will upset its strategy to help Pheu Thai scoop up as many parliamentary seats as possible and get around a post-coup system meant to cap the number of seats that big parties like Pheu Thai can win.

It will also put former army chief Prayut – running on the Palang Pracharath Party's ticket – in a better position to return as premier after the election.

Meanwhile, Thailand maintains a lese majeste law that prescribes up to 15 years' jail for any act deemed to have defamed or insulted the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent.

Thai Raksa Chart, which had kept a low profile all weekend, cancelled a meeting and press conference yesterday. Many of its key executive members were not present at its party headquarters in Bangkok.

Ms Sutisa Prathumkul, a member of the party's candidate screening committee, told The Straits Times: "It was a last-minute notice and so many executives could not come in time. So we postponed the meeting until further notice."

Last Saturday, the party issued a statement stating that it would comply with the King's wishes. That day, Princess Ubolratana thanked people for their support in an Instagram message, writing: "I wish to see Thailand move forward to be admired and accepted by the international community."

The country has been deeply divided for over a decade, wracked by bitter rivalry between royalist pro-military factions and groups linked to Thaksin, a billionaire tycoon who upended traditional patronage politics when he came to power in 2001.

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Beijing upbeat on US trade talks but S. China Sea issue a worry

The two sides are trying to hammer out a deal ahead of a March 1 deadline when US tariffs on $200 billion (S$272 billion) worth of Chinese imports are scheduled to increase to 25 per cent from 10 per cent.

BEIJING • China struck an upbeat note yesterday as trade talks resumed with the United States in Beijing, but also expressed anger at a US Navy mission through the disputed South China Sea, which has cast a shadow over the prospect for improved Beijing-Washington ties.

The US is expected to keep pressing China on longstanding demands that it reform how it treats American companies' intellectual property in order to seal a trade deal that could prevent tariffs from rising on Chinese imports. Negotiations concluded in Washington last month without a deal and with the top US negotiator declaring that a lot more work needed to be done.

Lower-level officials kicked off yesterday's meetings, led on the American side by deputy US trade representative Jeffrey Gerrish. Officials from the agriculture, energy and commerce departments will also participate in the talks, said an Agence France-Presse report.

Higher principal-level talks will take place on Thursday and Friday with US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin meeting Chinese Vice-Premier Liu He, The China Daily newspaper reported.

"We, of course, hope, and the people of the world want to see, a good result," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying said at a regular news briefing yesterday.

The same day the latest talks began, two US warships sailed near islands claimed by China in the disputed South China Sea, a US official told Reuters. Ms Hua said the ships entered the waters without China's permission and that Beijing has expressed firm opposition and dissatisfaction at the move.

China's navy had tracked the vessels and warned them to leave, Ms Hua added, accusing Washington of provocation and of harming China's sovereignty.

The two sides are trying to hammer out a deal ahead of a March 1 deadline when US tariffs on US$200 billion (S$272 billion) worth of Chinese imports are scheduled to increase to 25 per cent from 10 per cent. Mr Lighthizer, named by President Donald Trump to spearhead the process after agreeing a 90-day truce in the trade war with Beijing, has been a strong proponent of pushing China to end what the US views as unfair trade practices, including stealing intellectual property and forcing US companies to share their technology with Chinese firms.

China has denied it engages in such practices.

Mr Trump last week said he did not plan to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping before that deadline, dampening hopes that a trade pact could be reached quickly. Rising US-China tensions have cost both countries billions of dollars and disrupted global trade and business flows, roiling financial markets.

Asked if the ships' passage would affect the trade talks, Ms Hua said that "a series of US tricks" showed what Washington was thinking.

But she added that China believed resolving trade frictions through dialogue was in the interests of both countries' people, and of global economic growth.

China claims a large part of the South China Sea and has built artificial islands and air bases there, prompting concern around the region and in Washington. REUTERS

Najib's graft trial today postponed, pending appeal

No new date set for hearing into case linked to scandal at 1MDB state fund

Malaysia's former prime minister Najib Razak has pleaded not guilty to 10 charges of criminal breach of trust, money laundering and abuse of power. PHOTO: BERNAMA

KUALA LUMPUR • A Malaysian court yesterday postponed the corruption trial of former prime minister Najib Razak over charges related to a multibillion-dollar scandal at state fund 1MDB pending an appeal, his lawyer said.

Najib has pleaded not guilty to 10 charges of criminal breach of trust, money laundering and abuse of power and his trial was originally set to begin today.

But his lawyers filed an application last week to stay the trial pending an appeal over a lower court's ruling to transfer some of the charges to the Kuala Lumpur High Court, media reported.

Mr Harvinderjit Singh, one of Najib's lawyers, told Reuters in a brief text message that the Court of Appeal had agreed to postpone the trial "until the appeal is heard".

No new date for the trial or the appeal has been set, he said.

Najib was ousted in an election in May last year amid public fury over the alleged theft of US$4.5 billion (S$6 billion) from 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

The charges against Najib, 66, relate to a suspected transfer of RM42 million (S$14 million) to his bank account from SRC International, a former 1MDB unit.

The trial is the first of several criminal proceedings that Najib is expected to face over the 1MDB scandal so far, and the sum involved is a fraction of the US$1 billion that investigators say allegedly made its way into the former premier's bank accounts.

At least six countries, including the United States, Switzerland and Singapore, have launched money laundering and graft probes into 1MDB, set up by Najib in 2009.

US prosecutors say money stolen from 1MDB was used to buy a private jet, luxury real estate, artworks by Picasso and Monet, as well as jewellery for Najib's wife, Rosmah Mansor. Najib and his wife both deny wrongdoing.

SRC was the initial focus of Malaysian investigators as all the suspicious transactions involving the firm were made through Malaysian entities, unlike other 1MDB-related transactions that went through foreign banks and companies.

Prior to the trial's postponement, Najib had challenged the appointment of Datuk Sulaiman Abdullah as the lead prosecutor in the case. Mr Sulaiman, a senior lawyer who is working on Najib's case pro bono, was appointed by Malaysia's Attorney-General Tommy Thomas.

Najib's lead counsel Muhammad Shafee Abdullah had argued against the legitimacy of Mr Sulaiman's appointment and contended that it was the duty of the prosecution to tender the letter of authorisation (fiat) before the court, on grounds that the production of the document was a prerequisite.

The prosecution refused to produce the letter, as this has been classified under the Official Secrets Act.

On Dec 18 last year, Justice Mohd Nazlan dismissed Najib's application to remove Mr Sulaiman, saying it lacked merit.

Najib is appealing against the High Court's decision.

REUTERS, THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

The charges against Najib, 66, relate to a suspected transfer of RM42 million (S$14 million) to his bank account from SRC International, a former 1MDB unit. The trial is the first of several criminal proceedings that Najib is expected to face over the 1MDB scandal so far, and the sum involved is a fraction of the US$1 billion that investigators say allegedly made its way into his bank accounts.

Lim Guan Eng may sue those querying his degree

PETALING JAYA • Malaysian Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng is considering filing defamatory suits against those who continue to query his education credentials. The parties include the media and other politicians

Reading from a press statement yesterday, Mr Lim's political secretary Tony Pua said the minister's lawyers had advised that Mr Lim reserve his rights to file defamatory claims against the newspapers that continued to print lies to diminish and question his position, stature and credibility.

Mr Lim's comments came after his accounting qualification became the latest to be scrutinised following a series of alleged false education credentials clouding several leaders from the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition.

Malaysian Chinese Association president Wee Ka Siong on Sunday questioned Mr Lim's credentials as an accountant, citing information from Monash University's website that Mr Lim obtained his Bachelor of Economics degree in 1984.

"I have no doubt over his degree qualification. However, I wonder how he became a qualified professional accountant in 1983 before he even graduated?" Datuk Seri Wee said in a Facebook posting.

Mr Lim's website says he graduated from Monash University, Australia, with a Bachelor of Economics degree and was a qualified professional accountant by 1983.

Mr Pua, in answering Dr Wee's question, said Mr Lim graduated in 1983 and that the Australian academic calendar ends in November. Mr Pua said universities have their own conventions in naming their degrees, adding that "having a 'Bachelor of Economics' degree does not mean that Lim didn't study accountancy".

Dr Wee, who is a Johor MP, also wanted to know how Mr Lim's qualification as a "qualified professional accountant" was accredited. "Was it by a local or foreign institution? Which country accepts an economics graduate to pass as a 'qualified professional accountant'?"

Mr Pua yesterday distributed copies of Mr Lim's certificate of membership of the Australian Society of Accountants, which said Mr Lim was admitted as a provisional member of the society on Feb 21, 1984. THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK

Priyanka hits the road to cries of 'Indira Gandhi's back'

India's Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, which is dominated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling BJP. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Her brother's banking on her to win India's most populous state

LUCKNOW (Uttar Pradesh) • Ms Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, the latest entrant into politics from India's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, has made her debut with a roadshow drawing thousands in the country's most populous state, months before a general election due by May.

Mr Rahul Gandhi, president of the opposition Congress party, pulled a surprise last month by appointing his younger sister a party general secretary. She will be its face in Uttar Pradesh, the state that sends the highest number of lawmakers to the Lower House of Parliament and is dominated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

But a string of BJP defeats in state elections late last year as well as rising discontent over a weak farm economy and lacklustre job growth have weakened Mr Modi's position, which an increasingly aggressive Congress is looking to capitalise on.

Ms Gandhi, who is usually referred to by just her first name Priyanka, bears a striking resemblance to her grandmother, former prime minister Indira Gandhi, and is known as a speaker able to connect with voters.

Congress hopes that the eyeballs the 47-year-old is able to attract will turn into votes. "It's like Indira Gandhi has come back," said Mr Fuzail Ahmed Khan, 45, a Congress supporter. "The state's farmers want Rahul Gandhi to be prime minister, Priyanka to be chief minister."

The late Mrs Indira Gandhi, known as the "Iron Lady", was criticised for suspending civil liberties for nearly two years starting in 1975. The Hindu nationalist BJP calls Priyanka's appointment an extension of Congress' "dynastic politics".

Posters of Priyanka lined the streets of the state capital, Lucknow, and hundreds of Congress supporters, accompanied by drummers, chanted her name as she emerged from the airport with her brother.

The siblings waved to supporters from atop a bus and then later from an SUV during the drive from the airport to their state office.

Mr Rahul Gandhi grabbed a microphone at a stopover and said Priyanka and lawmaker Jyotiraditya Scindia's appointments as state party leaders were aimed at beyond the general election and bringing Congress into power in Uttar Pradesh.

"If there is a heart of the country, it is Uttar Pradesh," he said to loud cheers, adding that "the aim is to form a government in the state. We'll bring a government of youth, poor and peasants".

But it will not be easy for the brother-sister combination in Uttar Pradesh, a poor state of 220 million people where two regional caste-based parties now compete for power with the BJP and Congress is only a marginal player.

The BJP won 73 of the 80 seats in the state in the last general election. BJP president Amit Shah said last week that the party would win 74 seats there this year.

Although Priyanka has helped manage elections for her brother and her mother, former Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, she has never held an official party post until now.

"I hope that we can together start a new kind of politics," she said in an audio message shared by Congress, but she did not make a speech in Lucknow amid fears, political analysts say, that she could overshadow her brother.

Since the announcement of Priyanka's entry into politics, India's financial crime-fighting agency Enforcement Directorate has questioned her husband, Mr Robert Vadra, in a case relating to alleged ownership of £1.9 million (S$3.3 million) of undisclosed assets abroad. His lawyer and Congress have dismissed the charges as politically motivated.

Priyanka, who drew more than 78,000 followers soon after joining Twitter on Monday and even before posting a single tweet, will spend three days in Lucknow meeting workers from over 40 constituencies. From 21 seats in the 2009 general election in Uttar Pradesh, Congress' tally fell to just two in 2014. REUTERS

Shoppers and staff of Crystal Galleria, a mall in downtown Shanghai, joining the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) delegation in tossing yusheng – or lo hei – yesterday, the seventh day of the Chinese New Year. The custom of eating raw fish is believed to have originated in Guangdong in the 19th century, according to SCCC chief executive Low Sze Wee. ST PHOTO: CHONG KOH PING

A taste of Singapore lo hei for shoppers at Shanghai mall

Chong Koh Ping
China Correspondent
In Shanghai

A Singapore cultural organisation has brought the country's distinctive Chinese New Year practice of tossing raw fish or lo hei to a shopping mall in downtown Shanghai.

The Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC) marked the seventh day of the new year by serving yusheng on a long table inside the mall, for the shopping centre's employees and shoppers to enjoy.

The SCCC also showcased its specially commissioned lo hei-themed red packet illustration that came with an original song at yesterday's Chinese New Year event at Crystal Galleria.

Traditionally, Singaporeans celebrated renri, or everyone's birthday, by tossing raw fish for good luck. It is now an activity practised throughout the festive period from the eve of the new year to the 15th day of the first Chinese lunar month.

"The custom of eating raw fish is believed to have originated in Guangdong in the 19th century," said SCCC chief executive Low Sze Wee in a statement.

"Local Cantonese chefs in Singapore in the 1960s then made it into a popular new year dish by including different ingredients and practices.

"This special Singapore custom is now making its way back to China, through this showcase of our local artistes, namely Ah Guo who created the red packet illustration, and pianist Peng Chi Sheng, who composed The Lo Hei Song for the illustration," Mr Low added.

Mr Peng performed The Lo Hei Song and other Singaporean and Chinese New Year numbers with two other Singaporean singers.

Growing up, he said, he thought lo hei was a Chinese tradition practised by ethnic Chinese everywhere.

"I didn't know that it doesn't exist in China or other places like Taiwan and Hong Kong," said Mr Peng.

The song is meant to help promote this tradition by teaching those unfamiliar with it the auspicious well-wishes to shout while tossing the raw fish salad.

Ms Khim Goh, regional director of asset management at Phoenix Property Investors, a private equity fund in Hong Kong which owns Crystal Galleria, said the focus of the festive celebrations at the mall is on some of the slowly diminishing or forgotten Chinese New Year customs.

"Lo hei is one such custom," said Ms Goh. "We are also glad to have representatives from Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre to join us this year on the seventh day of the Chinese New Year."

This is the third year that the mall has organised a lo hei event to introduce the practice to its patrons in Shanghai.

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Thailand frees Bahraini footballer after extradition bid dropped

BANGKOK • Thailand yesterday freed a jailed refugee Bahraini footballer with residency status in Australia, after Bahrain abandoned its bid to seek his extradition – and immigration officials said he was immediately driven to the airport.

Mr Hakeem al-Araibi, 25, who fled Bahrain in 2014 and received refugee status in Australia, was arrested last November at a Bangkok airport while on a honeymoon trip, following an Interpol notice issued at Bahrain's request.

However, the Middle East nation has withdrawn the request, prompting a Thai court to approve a motion by prosecutors to drop the case against the footballer, Thai officials said.

"There are no grounds to hold him anymore. It is his right to decide where he will go next. He is a free man," said Mr Chatchom Akapin, an official in the Thai Attorney-General's office.

A Reuters witness said Mr Araibi was seen leaving the Bangkok remand prison in a car and immigration officials said he was heading for the main international airport in the Thai capital.

Rights group Amnesty International, which lobbied for his release, later said Mr Araibi had arrived at the airport. It was not immediately clear when or why Bahrain withdrew its request.

A Bahrain government spokesman declined to give details when asked who ordered the halt of the legal proceedings. However,

Footballer Hakeem al-Araibi was arrested last year, following an Interpol notice issued at Bahrain's request.

the authorities in Bahrain, which had accused Mr Araibi of crimes committed during the Arab Spring protests of 2011, said the country reaffirmed its right to pursue legal action against him.

In a statement, Bahrain's Foreign Ministry said it had noted the halt in legal proceedings and the verdict against the footballer remained. Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it had no comment on the case.

The detention of Mr Araibi, who appeared with his feet in shackles at a court hearing last week, drew international criticism, with the Australian authorities and fellow footballers urging Thailand to release him. Mr Araibi says he faces torture if he returns to Bahrain.

In the Australian capital of Canberra, Prime Minister Scott Morrison welcomed the decision of the Thai government. "We greatly respect the process that they have had to work through and we greatly appreciate their listening to the issues that have been raised by our government and many others," he told a news conference.

Mr Araibi has said he wants to return to Australia, where he has lived since 2014 and plays for a Melbourne football club.

He was convicted of vandalising a police station during 2011 anti-government protests in Bahrain and sentenced in absentia after he fled. Mr Araibi denies the charges, saying he was playing in a televised soccer match at the time of the police station attack.

This is the second time in weeks that Thailand's treatment of refugees has come under scrutiny.

Last month, the Thai authorities detained an 18-year-old Saudi woman after she said she was fleeing family abuse, but Bangkok halted plans to deport her to Saudi Arabia. The case of Ms Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun ended in her resettlement in Canada. REUTERS

WorldBriefs

Iran marks 40 years since revolution

TEHERAN • Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday blasted a US "conspiracy" against the country as vast crowds marked 40 years since the Islamic Revolution at a time of heightened tensions with Washington.

"The presence of people today on the streets all over Islamic Iran... means that the enemy will never reach its evil objectives," Mr Rouhani told those thronging Teheran's Azadi Square.

Chador-clad women, militia members in camouflage fatigues and ordinary citizens marched through the capital in freezing rain to mark the day in February 1979 that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ended millennia of royal rule. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Vietnam minister to visit North Korea

HANOI • Vietnam's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh will visit North Korea ahead of this month's planned summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Hanoi, a spokesman said yesterday.

Mr Trump said last week that he would hold his second meeting with Mr Kim in the Vietnamese capital on Feb 27 and 28.

The Vietnamese Foreign Minister will visit North Korea from today to Thursday, the spokesman said in a statement posted on social network Twitter, without giving further details.

The Trump-Kim summit follows an unprecedented first meeting between the leaders in Singapore last June. REUTERS

Aussie drug lord 'stabbed in prison'

SYDNEY • A notorious crime boss who was once Australia's most wanted man has been stabbed in prison, reports said yesterday, months after revelations that his lawyer was a police informant cast doubt on his criminal convictions.

Tony Mokbel, who masterminded a drug trafficking empire, was a central figure in Melbourne's gangland war which began in the late 1990s. The violence claimed dozens of lives and was later immortalised in the popular Australian TV series Underbelly.

Police said a man, aged in his 50s – widely reported to be Mokbel by Australian media – was flown from the maximum security Barwon Prison, south-west of Melbourne, in a serious condition after a stabbing yesterday.

A second man, who was in his 30s, was also taken to hospital, police added. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Acting Pentagon chief in Afghanistan

He stresses importance of involving Kabul government in peace talks with Taleban

Acting US Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan arriving in Afghanistan yesterday on an unannounced trip. He said his goal was to get an understanding of the situation on the ground from commanders. PHOTO: REUTERS

KABUL • Acting US Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan, who arrived in Afghanistan yesterday, said it was important that the Afghan government was involved in talks, from which it has so far been excluded, to end the 17-year-old war.

Mr Shanahan, who will meet American troops and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on his first trip in his new role, said he had so far not had any order to reduce the nearly 14,000 US troops in the country.

Mr Ghani's government has been shut out of the evolving peace talks between Taleban negotiators and US envoys, with the hardline Islamist movement branding his government a US puppet. Kabul is also concerned that a sharp drawdown of American forces could lead to chaos in the region.

"It is important that the Afghan government is involved in discussions regarding Afghanistan," Mr Shanahan told reporters travelling with him on the unannounced trip. "The Afghans have to decide what Afghanistan looks like in the future. It's not about the US, it is about Afghanistan."

Mr Shanahan took over from Mr James Mattis, who quit last December over policy differences with President Donald Trump.

The acting defence chief also said he could not make any guarantees because US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad was leading the talks. "The US military has strong security interests in the region. (The) presence will evolve out of those discussions," Mr Shanahan said.

He told reporters that his goal on the trip was to get an understanding of the situation on the ground from commanders and then brief Mr Trump on his findings.

US officials have held several rounds of talks with the Taleban in Qatar since last year in what is widely seen as the most serious bid yet for peace in Afghanistan since the Taleban was ousted by US-backed Afghan forces in late 2001.

Both sides hailed progress after the latest round last month, although significant obstacles remain. Those include the involvement of the Afghan government. The next round of talks is due in Qatar on Feb 25.

Mr Michael Kugelman, a South Asia specialist at the Woodrow Wilson Centre, said Mr Shanahan's main priority in Kabul should be to address Afghan government concerns.

"The top priority of Shanahan has to be to impress upon the government that we're going to do everything we can to get you into this conversation," Mr Kugelman said.

Afghanistan and neighbouring countries are also concerned about the effect of a sudden withdrawal of US forces on the region.

Mr Trump has offered no specifics about when he would bring home the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan but has said progress in negotiations with the Taleban would enable a troop reduction and a "focus on counter-terrorism".

Officials have expressed concern that if US troops leave, Afghanistan security forces, already stretched thin, could crumble. REUTERS

Aussie panel signals rules to reduce tech giants' news impact

SYDNEY • The head of Australia's competition watchdog has warned that tough new regulation of tech giants such as Google and Facebook was needed to protect the future of independent journalism.

Mr Rod Sims, chairman of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), said the market power wielded by Google and Facebook has had a devastating impact on Australian news media.

While the number of journalists employed by Australian papers fell 20 per cent from 2014 to 2017 as print advertising revenues dwindled, he noted, Google and Facebook captured nearly 70 per cent of online advertising spend.

"This shift in advertising revenue online and to digital platforms has reduced the ability of media businesses to fund news and journalism," he said yesterday in remarks prepared for delivery to Sydney's International Institute of Communications.

"We cannot simply leave the production of news and journalism to market forces," added Mr Sims, whose agency has been carrying out a lengthy probe into the impact of digital platforms on the news industry in Australia.

While the platforms capture the vast majority of advertising revenue, they do not create any original news, Mr Sims said.

"Rather they select, curate, evaluate, rank and arrange news stories produced by third parties," he said, noting that this market power increased the "risk of filter bubbles and unreliable news on digital platforms".

"Holding such critical positions in both the media and advertising markets results in special responsibilities," he added.

The ACCC launched its inquiry a year ago and is accepting final submissions from industry players until the end of this week, before issuing its final report in June.

But Mr Sims signalled yesterday that the final recommendations would include calls for broad new regulations on the digital behemoths and the opaque algorithms they use in disseminating news and advertising.

"Virtually no media regulation applies to digital platforms and this contributes to regulatory disparity... that would appear to provide the digital platforms with an unfair advantage," he said.

A media regulator, he said, should have the power to compel digital platforms to reveal how news is ranked in search results, including whether advertiser-funded content is ranked higher than paid content.

Finally, Mr Sims suggested a series of proposals to support local and independent journalism, including tax offsets for people who subscribe to news media which meet a set of quality standards.

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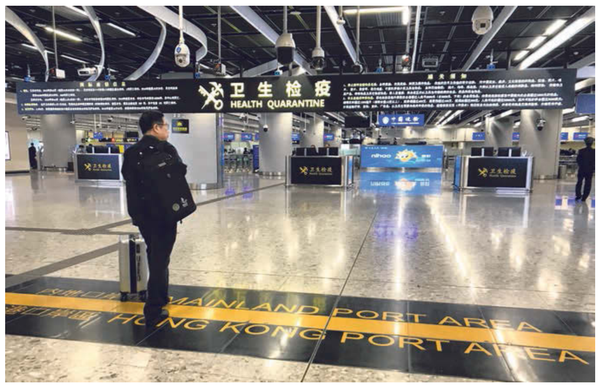
WORLD FOCUS

A RAIL JOURNEY UP NORTH

China Correspondent Chong Koh Ping travelled on the Fuxing (Rejuvenation) train from Hong Kong to Beijing, a high-speed rail link launched last September, taking in the sights and stories of China, past and present.



The Hong Kong West Kowloon Station houses both the Hong Kong and Chinese immigration checkpoints. This means the Chinese authorities can apply mainland laws, including the power to arrest people inside the station, which is physically in Hong Kong. ST PHOTO: CHONG KOH PING

Riding in comfort on the high-speed rail (top) may bring Hong Kong (above) closer to the mainland but Hong Kongers fear a faster erosion of the "one country, two systems" arrangement which gives it a high degree of autonomy. ST PHOTOS: CHONG KOH PING

STARTING STOP: HONG KONG

One country, two systems

The opening of a mega sea bridge and a high-speed rail link this year has made Hong Kong more accessible to mainlanders.

Likewise, it is now a lot easier for people in Hong Kong to visit major Chinese cities not just around the Pearl River Delta region but also further inland, such as central Wuhan and Zhengzhou.

But this has also sparked concerns that greater integration with the mainland will mean a faster erosion of the "one country, two systems" arrangement that allows Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy in its legal and political systems.

For example, the new Hong Kong West Kowloon Station for the high-speed rail houses both the Hong Kong and Chinese immigration checkpoints.

This means that while the station is physically in Hong Kong, the Chinese authorities can apply mainland laws there, including the power to arrest people inside the station.

To many Hong Kongers, this threatens their autonomy, rights and freedom, and the special administrative region is in danger of becoming just another city in southern Guangdong province.

In recent years, the city has seen more protests, especially among the young, calling for self-determination and even independence.

But Beijing has emphasised that the central government has comprehensive jurisdiction over the city and also repeatedly reminded Hong Kongers that the territory is an inseparable part of the country.

Observers say the current "one country, two systems" arrangement, which is due to end only in 2047, appears shaky. Even as the two sides grow further apart, with opposing views of the city's autonomy, Hong Kong is being pulled physically closer into the embrace of the motherland.

The double-deck road and rail bridge, Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge, is often referred to as the "First Bridge of the Yangtze". PHOTO: HUBEI.GOV.CN

WUHAN

Ancient city has stood test of time and water

Wuhan, the capital of central Hubei province, is known for its long history and large number of ponds and lakes – 166 currently.

The city, which sits at the confluence of the Yangtze and Han rivers, is prone to massive floods.

City planners hope to change this through a pilot programme that aims to remake Wuhan into a "sponge city" which can soak up 70 per cent of rainwater.

Come war, revolution or massive floods, Wuhan has remained standing, for some 3,500 years.

It was formed by combining three cities – Wuchang, Hankou and Hanyang, which was already a busy port during the Han dynasty more than 2,000 years ago.

In the winter of 208 AD, the Battle of Red Cliffs – one of the most famous battles in Chinese history – took place near Wuhan.

The allied forces of the southern warlords – Liu Bei from the Kingdom of Shu and Sun Quan from the Kingdom of Wu – won against the northern warlord Cao Cao from the Kingdom of Wei in this decisive battle. Around that time, walls were built to protect Hanyang and Wuchang, which mark the foundation of Wuhan.

Wuhan is also the birthplace of the Xinhai revolution, which saw the Kuomintang overthrow the Qing Dynasty to establish the Chinese Republic on Oct 10, 1911.

In 1927, Wuhan was China's capital under the Kuomintang left wing, and the country's wartime capital for 10 months in 1937. Today, it is the most populous city in central China.

Students at one of the many private schools teaching the so-called "Shaolin way of life" in Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province. ST PHOTO: LIM YAN LIANG

ZHENGZHOU

City has sweet spot in New Silk Road to Europe

Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of central Henan province, is in a sweet spot in the middle of major trade routes.

People and goods always seem to be on the go in Zhengzhou, which is set to get even busier as China develops its rail freight services to Europe.

The routes, collectively known as the China-Europe Railway (CR) Express, connects 59 Chinese cities to 49 other cities in 15 countries, according to figures for last year.

They are part of a bigger plan by China to build a new Silk Road to Europe under its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to boost trade between the country and other regions of the world.

Transporting goods on the CR Express takes 16 to 20 days, half of the 35 days or so required by sea, and involves only one-fifth of air freight costs.

Zhengzhou has seen a healthy growth in its rail trips to and from Europe since its service was launched in 2013. Last year, 501 trains ran between Zhengzhou and Europe, more than the total in the first four years of its operation.

One criticism of the CR Express is that the trains are typically loaded with goods such as electronics and industrial products going to Europe, but would return to China half-empty.

Going forward, Zhengzhou wants to expand eastward to link up with Japan and South Korea via the east coast ports of Qingdao, Lianyungang and Tianjin.

The glass bridge in Shijiazhuang, Hebei province, spans two buildings, and is said to be China's first urban glass bridge. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

SHIJIAZHUANG

Smog capital of China

The capital of northern Hebei province was China's smoggiest city in 2017, in a ranking by the country's environment ministry.

Shijiazhuang is in a steel-producing region known for bad air.

In recent years, China has vowed to bring back blue skies amid rising public anger.

"Clear waters and green mountains are as good as mountains of gold and silver," Chinese President Xi Jinping has said repeatedly, indicating a move away from the previous "growth at all cost" economic model.

The central government has listed fighting pollution alongside curbing financial risks and stamping out extreme poverty as its top three economic priorities.

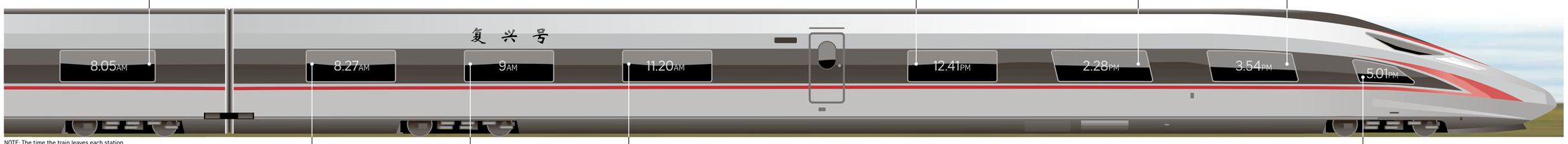
In 2017, 28 northern cities, including Shijiazhuang, were forced to shut factories, limit the number of cars on the roads and curb coal use. All but three cities managed to lower the emission of small, breathable pollutants known as PM2.5 by at least 15 per cent in the winter months.

In 2018, the goal was lowered to a reduction of 3 per cent in PM2.5 emissions, but a lot more cities – 79 in all – have to meet the goal.

But things do not look too rosy.

According to an analysis of official data by Reuters, the average PM2.5 levels in the 79 cities was 69.8 micrograms in November last year, up 14 per cent from the same period in 2017.

Observers say local governments are loosening their grip on pollution crackdowns amid a slowing economy.



NOTE: The time the train leaves each station.

Forty minutes from Shenzhen North Station is this enclave, where you can buy a Van Gogh replica or get a self-portrait done. ST PHOTO: CHONG KOH PING

SHENZHEN

High-speed rail spurs development

A new business district for boom town Shenzhen is shaping up around the Shenzhen North Station, the new hub of South China's high-speed rail (HSR) and passenger train network.

Slated for completion in 2022, the 6.1 sq km area is around the same size as the current Central Business District in Futian.

The area, which has drawn a total investment of more than 200 billion yuan (S$40 billion), will be home to more than 60 new skyscrapers. It is projected to provide as many as 250,000 high-end white-collar jobs and house 110,000 people.

In a common pattern across China, the HSR has spurred real-estate investments in the areas along train lines, where better connectivity means people can live further away from core cities.

And, in this case, a second city centre is being built around the HSR station in a very large city.

Professor Huang Bo from the Chinese University of Hong Kong noted in a recent analysis that in Wuxi and Suzhou, two well-developed cities in eastern Jiangsu province with high populations and large local economies, the HSR stations are about 20km from their downtown areas.

New towns have developed immediately around these HSR stations to harness the increased transport connectivity, he said.

This has had the effect of driving growth in the local economy and infrastructure, he added.

But not all HSR towns are successful. Some remain underdeveloped, with poor infrastructure, due in part to poor planning.

Experts call for more planning for these new HSR towns as China continues to expand its HSR network across the country.

In Shamian, Guangzhou, European-style buildings dot the area. Many have since been converted to restaurants and shops. ST PHOTO: CHONG KOH PING

GUANGZHOU

Great buzz in Greater Bay Area

Home to Shenzhen and its tech innovators, as well as Hong Kong and its banking and legal system.

Deeper synergies between the two dynamos are on the cards with the development of the Greater Bay Area made up of Hong Kong, Macau, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and seven Chinese cities in Guangdong province around the Pearl River estuary.

China plans to turn the area into an economic powerhouse centred on innovation and technology to rival bay areas in San Francisco, Tokyo and New York.

Thrice as big as the San Francisco Bay Area at 56,000 sq km, the Greater Bay Area is home to nearly 70 million people and accounted for about 12 per cent of China's gross domestic product last year.

HSBC estimates that the Greater Bay Area's economic output will equal that of the New York Metropolitan Area by 2025.

To create a "one-hour commuting circle" linking major cities in the Greater Bay Area, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge was opened to traffic last year, as was the Hong Kong high-speed rail link.

These developments are also aimed at drawing Hong Kong and Macau closer to China, making it easier for people in these special administrative regions to live and work in the mainland.

A recent survey of more than 700 business executives at companies operating in the Greater Bay Area found that nearly 80 per cent of them expect the economy of the area to outpace the rest of China for the next three years.

They see technology and innovation, trade and logistics, and financial services as the sectors likely to do particularly well.

Mao Zedong sculpture in Hunan, home province of the late Chairman Mao. Visitors also head for the trend-setting Hunan TV station. PHOTO: XINHUA

CHANGSHA

China's soft power

Hunan, the home province of late Chairman Mao Zedong, draws not just Maoist devotees but also "pilgrims" of a different stripe.

Some visit Hunan TV station to see how the trend-setting station cooks up hit variety shows such as Happy Camp, Day Day Up or Singer. It is China's second most watched channel after the state-owned CCTV-1.

A visit to Hunan is seen as a necessary rite of passage by some foreign artists hoping to burnish their name in China, including Singapore singer Kit Chan and British pop star Jessie J, who took part in music talent show Singer, formerly called I'm A Singer.

Hunan TV is part of a larger boom in China's entertainment industry, which has given the world dramas and variety shows as well as Internet video-streaming platforms such as iQiyi and Tencent.

Last year, China exported more than US$400 million (S$543 million) worth of movies, television productions and related services to the rest of the world.

A Chinese period drama, Story Of Yanxi Palace, even became the most searched TV show of 2018 on Google. Singapore netizens are most interested in the show, followed by those in Malaysia, Brunei, Macau and Hong Kong.

Observers note that the lavish sets and A-list stars of these Chinese dramas help Beijing to project its soft power overseas.

Taiwanese sociologist Chuang Chia-yin expects Chinese popular culture to dominate the region in another five to 10 years.

However, industry players say there is still a long way to go for Chinese entertainment to rival the Korean wave, or Hallyu, phenomenon that has swept the region and beyond in recent years.

LAST STOP: BEIJING

High-speed rail diplomacy

The destination stop of West Beijing on the West Kowloon-Beijing West HSR route is one of three HSR stops in the Chinese capital. From Beijing, you can transfer to a passenger train that takes you to Moscow on the Trans-Siberian railway 8,961km away.

In 10 years, China went from having one HSR line – linking Beijing to Tianjin in 2008 – to having the world's longest HSR network with 29,000km of tracks criss-crossing the country.

Its HSR network has dramatically reduced travel time and transformed the way people live and work.

Since the early 2010s, China has doubled down on efforts to export its high-speed rail technologies. It has built tracks in countries such as Turkey, Hungary and Serbia and sold trains to others.

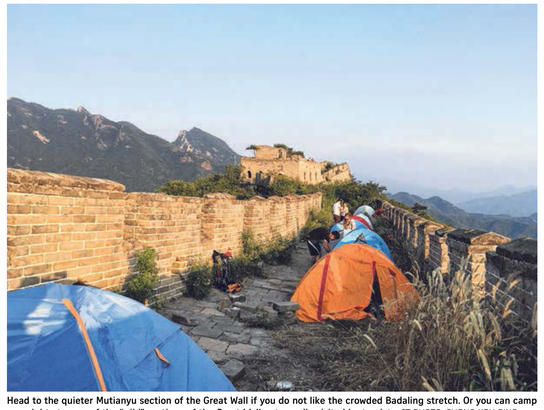
But China's HSR diplomacy has not been all smooth-sailing. Projects in the United States, Mexico and Myanmar have been cancelled while the Jakarta-Bandung line in Indonesia and the Kunming-Bangkok line linking the south-western Chinese city to the Thai capital have met with delays.

There are concerns that the HSR investments could be financially unviable for the mostly developing countries.

The US$6 billion HSR project connecting Laos' capital Vientiane to Kunming is one example, though supporters of the project say it will form a crucial link in China's plan to build a high-speed land link that could extend all the way to Singapore.

There is talk of China's sprawling HSR network extending from Liaoning's provincial capital of Shenyang to Baihe at the foot of what the Chinese call Changbai Mountain, or Mount Paektu in North Korea.

The Liaoning government is also proposing a rail link from the Chinese border city Dandong to the North Korean capital Pyongyang and then to Seoul and Busan in South Korea. With the two Koreas making progress on their proposed inter-Korean rail project, you may one day be able to take the high-speed rail from Hong Kong all the way to Busan.



Head to the quieter Mutianyu section of the Great Wall if you do not like the crowded Badaling stretch. Or you can camp overnight at some of the "wild" sections of the Great Wall not usually visited by tourists. ST PHOTO: CHONG KOH PING

Interactive: Fast train link

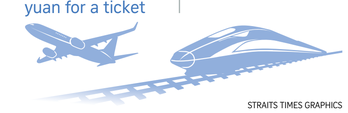
Travel through the 8 cities on the HK-Beijing HSR
http://str.sg/hk-beijing-hsr

SCAN TO WATCH VIDEO

http://str.sg/hkbeijingrail

FROM HK TO BEIJING

	BY PLANE	BY HSR
Distance	1,958km	2,439km
Time needed	3 to 3½ hours	About 9 hours
Price	From under 1,000 yuan (S$200) to more than 2,000 yuan for a ticket	1,077 yuan for a second-class ticket



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The Straits Times says

Surviving in face of superpower tussle

Canada is facing the fallout from its move to arrest Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer of Chinese telecoms giant Huawei, last December at the request of its neighbour, the United States. It is now bearing the brunt of China's wrath, as the proverbial grass that gets trampled on when elephants fight – in geopolitical context, the small and medium-sized states that get hurt when major powers jostle. How Ottawa deals with this could be salutary for countries in the East Asian region as rivalry between China and the US intensifies and they get drawn into it. Days after Meng's arrest in Vancouver, two Canadians, a former diplomat and a businessman, were detained in China. Last month, a Canadian convicted of drug smuggling had his 15-year jail term changed to a death sentence after a one-day retrial. These cases have been seen as retaliation for Meng's arrest.

But the Chinese have not stopped there. They appear to be also using their economic muscle as leverage to get the Canadians to release Meng to them. Canola shipments from Canada to China have been taking longer to clear Chinese customs, and permits needed to import genetically modified crops, including canola, have been more difficult to obtain, according to news reports. Canada has also been taken off a list of approved travel destinations for Chinese tourists, reports said, a likely blow to the Canadian tourism industry, which sees more than 600,000 Chinese travellers annually. And negotiations for a free trade deal – for the Canadians a way of diversifying trade away from the US, its biggest trade partner – have stalled. While the quarrel is between China and the US – Washington is seeking Meng's extradition to face charges of fraud related to sanctions against Iran and technological theft – Beijing has trained its guns on Canada. As former Canadian diplomat to China David Mulroney told the BBC, Canada made for a handy scapegoat for China to "kick and whack" for the arrest while it works out a resolution to the trade dispute.

In the face of Chinese pressure, Canada has stood firm on its position that the extradition process is an independent, legal one that needs to run its course. To the Americans, as US President Donald Trump has raised the possibility of linking the Huawei case to trade negotiations with the Chinese, Ottawa has made clear that any foreign country requesting extradition should make sure the process is not politicised. It has also pushed back against Chinese strongarm tactics by garnering the support of allies, including several European countries, Australia and New Zealand. How the whole saga will play out will be closely watched by countries around the world. Canada's refusal to be cowed, its effort to strike a balance between two major powers and its seeking strength in numbers are laudable responses that others will have to ponder too.

Many practical lessons in history for Singapore

From forecasting to avoiding errors in geopolitical calculation, a proper study of history can be a good guide to the future

Scott Anthony

For The Straits Times

One of the things I like about living in Singapore is the optimism – the honest confidence that tomorrow will be better than today. There's a belief that everything can and will be remade, and remade better.

The contrast with present-day Europe could not be more stark. It's invigorating.

But one issue with constantly looking to the future is that it can lead you to underestimate the utility of the past. Singaporeans are proud of their past but, at the moment, it seems history is mainly used to bolster or contest a sense of identity. The debate over 1819 and how much significance can or should be read into Stamford Raffles' landing is a good example.

Although questions of identity are clearly very important, if overemphasised, they can turn history into a morass of bad-tempered and unwinnable cultural arguments. Meanwhile, the prejudice that history "is the reciting of facts" remains quite deeply embedded.

The problem with both these dominant points of view is that they miss many of the ways in which history can make a practical contribution to the future. Over the past few years, Singapore has made considerable investment in history and the humanities, yet the opportunities that this investment opens up are not widely understood. There is still little sense that history has anything practically useful to contribute to the task of shaping tomorrow. But it does.

PREDICTING THE FUTURE

At the most basic level, historical research can improve the models which we use to predict the future. To give a dramatic example, climate scientists have turned to the ship logbooks of the English East India Company because by making use of the observations recorded by 17th-century sailors, they can build a long-term understanding of climate change.

Meteorology is a young science, its maturing interrelated with the rise of aviation. Until this climate data began to be recovered by historians, phrases often heard in the media, such as "the hottest (or coldest) since records began", did not extend very far back in time; now, the available instrumental records span more than 200 years. With this data, it is possible to better model rainfall, and predict harvests and the impact of floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Even more importantly, historical research helps us to question the models that we use to predict the future. "Why did no one see this coming?" – as Queen Elizabeth II famously asked economists at the London School of Economics after the Great Financial Crisis of 2007. One persuasive explanation was that the mathematical models used by modern economists had become decoupled from the historical contexts that had informed their creation.

The global downgrading of economic history as a discipline meant that not enough attention was being paid to what was being put into, and left out of, the models used to understand the global economy. The handful of economists around the world who did not accept economic orthodoxies about debt and money predicted the crisis, but because they did not accept those orthodoxies, they were professionally marginalised. The political, cultural and economic aftershocks of this oversight are still playing out today.

Preliminary research by Project Hindsight, a strategic historical research consultancy based in London, has gone a step further. Its research has examined a series of international private and governmental long-term predictions made since 1963 in order to evaluate how reliable the forecasting of the future has been. The answer is, not very.

In fact, it's becoming evident that our understanding of technological change and its impact is almost always entirely wrong (and only marginally better with economic predictions). This insight is worth keeping in mind because we live in an age when almost all of the information about new technologies, even very promising ones such as artificial intelligence, is primarily produced by those very same industries – industries that often demand tax breaks and regulatory exceptions as a down payment for future riches which may or may not arrive.

In contrast, what this historical research into forecasting suggests is that social data produces reliable long-term results. If you want to glimpse the future reality of Singapore, ask a demographer.

History matters for its own sake. But it is also important because it enables you to think dynamically and relationally in a world where the deterministic language of machines is often used as shorthand to describe changes that are far more complex. Indeed, it is vital to civic competence.

NEW MEDICAL DISCOVERIES

Of course, there are also more straightforward contributions that historians can make to national life.

At the Nanyang Technological University, digital techniques are being developed to study how ancient and mediaeval medicinal products were used across different Eurasian drug cultures. The hope was that by bringing together (for example) mediaeval historians, microbiologists, medicinal chemists and data scientists, new drugs could be created. In the context of the rise of antibiotic-resistant microbes, it's an urgent undertaking.

The way in which Chinese Nobel Prize winner Tu Youyou referred to traditional Chinese medicine to develop treatments for malaria is a model here.

Despite living in an era defined by an abundance of information, we need historians to make sure we don't forget what we already know.

AVOIDING GEOPOLITICAL MISTAKES OF THE PAST

There is also more to do in the one public role for historians that people instinctively do support. The idea that people who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it is a ubiquitous one (if almost certainly not true). While using historical perspectives on contemporary geopolitics seems uncontroversial because historians are liable to say things that leaders do not want to hear, it has also proven difficult to realise.

The Chinese government has come down hard on so-called "New Qing History" because its insistence on a more autonomous Manchu identity complicates present-day territorial claims.

Meanwhile, recent work on contemporary Russia by researchers like Mr Tony Wood and Dr Mark Smith has shown Russian President Vladimir Putin to be in a compromised position, constantly struggling to appease and strike bargains between rival opposing domestic power centres.

Yet, this analysis is mostly ignored in the West. Instead, a media narrative of super-villainy is promoted for reasons that have plenty to do with gaining tactical advantage on the battlefield that is contemporary US politics. This course of action risks a new Cold War and raises the chances that the next Russian president will be more aggressively nationalist.

To help counter such scenarios, an Applied History Project was recently set up at Harvard University to provide policymakers with historical perspectives, and to model interventions and their consequences. Given the right environment, it would be easy to imagine a similar venture flourishing here.

VITAL WORK IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

What I am trying to suggest is that there is a plethora of uses that history can and should be put to, but many of these uses are not fully exploited yet in Singapore.

When I ran the Public and Popular History programme at the University of Cambridge, many of our students were recruited by management consultancies, financial institutions and large legal firms. The rationale of recruiters like Boston Consulting was that if you're going into a large organisation to offer advice, you need to be able to quickly come to understand how and why it came to be structured in the way it is. Historians are trained for this.

Similarly, large financial and legal organisations that are hungry for acquisitions need to understand the liabilities they are taking on. Even more so because we live in an age where the electronic office has wrecked institutional memory, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

History matters for its own sake. But it is also important because it enables you to think dynamically and relationally in a world where the deterministic language of machines is often used as shorthand to describe changes that are far more complex. Indeed, it is vital to civic competence.

Far beyond debates about the contemporary significance of 1819, the multi-disciplinary analysis produced by Singapore's historians has so much more to contribute to the nation. The future needs historians.

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• There will be a talk on the use of history in policymaking by Dr Andrew Blick from King's College London, titled Learning From The Past Or Repeating Mistakes. It will be held next Tuesday at 6.30pm at the National Library. For free tickets, go to learningfromthepastlecture.peatix.com/

What is the point of second Trump-Kim summit?

There has been scant evidence of progress on central issue of denuclearisation since the Singapore summit last June

Nick Wadhams and Youkyung Lee

United States President Donald Trump is set to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in less than three weeks, yet the biggest question hanging over the leaders' second summit is why they are even having it.

Since their historic face-to-face meeting in Singapore eight months ago, North Korea has made little progress towards giving up its nuclear weapons and continues to do what it can to evade sanctions.

The top US negotiator with Mr Kim's regime acknowledges that the two sides still do not agree on what denuclearisation might look like or what the US might offer to satisfy him.

Those gaps underscore just how far apart the two sides remain as the clock ticks towards Mr Trump's second summit with Mr Kim, set for Hanoi on Feb 27 and 28. The differences have led many of Mr Trump's critics to argue that the second summit will look a lot like the first, which produced a vague set of principles but little tangible progress.

"Although it would be great if the two sides made progress on slowing North Korea's nuclear programme at the summit, the most likely outcome is rinse and repeat," said Dr Vipin Narang, a political science professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Mr Trump's approach to the summit underscores the top-down style that has become one of his hallmarks, upending traditional diplomacy that depends on aides to hammer out agreements for leaders to drag over the finish line.

SINGAPORE SUMMIT OUTCOMES

President Trump's supporters say the US has already achieved a lot – including a suspension of missile tests and the return of US soldiers' remains – and sacrificed little.

Hope for a lasting deal, they argue, is higher than it has been in years. Mr Trump said as much during his State of the Union address last week: "If I had not been elected president of the United States, we would right now, in my opinion, be in a major war with North Korea."

US officials also point out that North Korea is no longer detaining any Americans – and recently released one rather than keep him as a bargaining chip. North Korea, for its part, can boast that it got Mr Trump to do something: Suspend major military drills with South Korea.

Before the Singapore summit, Mr Trump agreed to put off annual exercises involving tens of thousands of troops, against the advice of his top advisers and allies Japan and South Korea.

"It's the gift that keeps on giving for the North Koreans," said Mr Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow for North-east Asia at the Heritage Foundation in Washington. "We have had no progress on denuclearisation. In fact, they continue to nuclearise."

The Singapore meeting, and the plans to hold another summit, are in themselves victories for North Korea. After years of criticism over its human rights record and its development of nuclear weapons, Mr Kim has gained global legitimacy with his outreach to Mr Trump and the South Korean government.

Mr Trump continues to lavish praise on Mr Kim, exchanging warm letters and calling him a leader who can make his country "a great economic powerhouse" if he gives up his nuclear arsenal.

"He may surprise some but he won't surprise me, because I have gotten to know him and fully understand how capable he is," Mr Trump said in a tweet last Friday.

WHAT CRITICS FEAR

Mr Kim may seek to exploit Mr Trump's apparent willingness to bend to the arguments of foreign leaders over his own advisers. That was demonstrated during his news conference in Helsinki last year with Russian President Vladimir Putin, when the American President appeared to give Russian denials of meddling in the 2016 election more credibility than his own intelligence community's assessments.

A fresh example came last December, when a phone call with Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan prompted Mr Trump's declaration that he is withdrawing US soldiers stationed in Syria.

"Kim's strategy is to just get Trump in a room," said Dr Sue Mi Terry, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst who is now at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "He looks at Turkey and says, 'wow, one phone call and he agreed to pull troops out of Syria – that's a good situation'."

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un with United States President Donald Trump in Singapore last June. The US is expected to seek "concrete deliverables" from the upcoming Vietnam summit. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Ultimately, the question is whether North Korea is genuinely prepared to give up its nuclear weapons.

Mr Dan Coats, the US director of national intelligence, told a Senate panel last month that Mr Kim was unlikely to do that because he viewed "nuclear arms as critical to regime survival".

A United Nations report last week found that North Korea continues to evade sanctions through illegal ship-to-ship transfers as well as illicit financial activities, according to diplomats who reviewed the report.

It also showed that North Korea was working to disperse elements of its ballistic-missile programme to shield it from decapitation strikes. Yet, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has said that Mr Kim has committed to denuclearising, and officials point to a series of small moves to make that case.

WHAT'S ON OFFER

In a speech last week, the US envoy to North Korea, Mr Stephen Biegun, pointed to North Korea's "preliminary steps" to dismantle two test sites, Tongchang-ri and Punggye-ri, even though those efforts took place without international inspectors in place. "They represent a step in the right direction," Mr Biegun said.

He also said North Korea had expressed a willingness to dismantle all of its plutonium- and uranium-enrichment facilities, beyond the Yongbyon plant he previously offered to shut.

Dr Cheong Seong-chang, vice-president of research planning at the Sejong Institute in South Korea, said that Mr Biegun and his North Korean counterpart, Mr Kim Hyok Chol, appeared more prepared than their predecessors last year.

"Between the first and the second summits, North Korea and the United States did not simply waste their time," Dr Cheong said. "They specified their negotiation strategies and refreshed their teams of negotiators to prepare to advance the negotiations."

In his speech, Mr Biegun argued that the US would seek "concrete deliverables" from the Vietnam summit, and "at some point" wanted a "comprehensive declaration" of the regime's nuclear stockpiles.

That was a softening of the US position that such a full accounting must come at the start of the process, a notion North Korea has dismissed as offering up a target list for US attacks. If North Korea agreed to tangible steps, the US was willing to offer concessions of its own, Mr Biegun said.

A peace declaration and talks to formally end the 1950 to 1953 Korean War are high on Mr Kim's wish list.

North Korea's willingness to engage with Mr Biegun – a former Ford Motor executive who they had shut out for months – reflects a significant change in attitude, according to Mr Robert Carlin, a former CIA and State Department intelligence analyst who took part in negotiations with North Korea under former president Bill Clinton's administration. "To expect too much of the process at this stage is a mistake," Mr Carlin said in an interview.

"People who want to see the endpoint show up now inevitably are going to be disappointed and critical. And it's sort of ridiculous to be that way." BLOOMBERG

Blackmail is not always a crime

Stephen L. Carter

I am not sure why anybody, even the National Enquirer, would pick a fight with the richest man in the world.

It is one thing to write about Amazon founder Jeff Bezos having an affair. That kind of story has long been the Enquirer's vile stock in trade. But to threaten Mr Bezos unless he calls off the dogs – that is, reins in his own probe of how the tabloid got its hands on his private text messages – well, that's a mistake no self-respecting merchant of sleaze should make. Like the song says: You don't tug on Superman's cape.

That is particularly true in a case like this one. If the facts are as Mr Bezos describes them, then what the Enquirer has attempted certainly looks like blackmail. The e-mails from the tabloid that Mr Bezos published at Medium demand that he drop the investigation or face publication of explicit photographs. That would seem to be a textbook example of demanding a thing of value in exchange for refraining from an act that would damage his reputation – exactly the elements every budding lawyer learns for the Bar exam.

Sure, the Enquirer denies that it has done anything illegal. What choice does it have? Even those of us who are hardline free-speech supporters have to concede that the tabloid has crossed the line.

But blackmail is a funny crime: Theorists have trouble explaining exactly why it is wrong, even though it seems intuitive that it is.

A couple of examples will make the point.

Suppose Mastermind says to Victim: "I have uncovered some embarrassing facts about you. I'm going to publish unless you give me $10,000." That's usually considered a crime.

Now, suppose, instead, Mastermind says to Victim: "I have discovered embarrassing facts about you. I'm going to publish them." That's not a crime.

Suppose, further, that Victim says to Mastermind: "Wait! I'll give you $10,000 if you don't publish them!" If Mastermind accepts Victim's offer, that's also not a crime. See the difficulty?

Blackmail laws prohibit threatening to do an act that's not criminal. For this reason, scholars have spent years trying to puzzle out a set of blackmail-like threats that should not be illegal.

For example, Professor Einer Elhauge of Harvard Law School has suggested that "uncontrived" threats not be prosecuted. These are, roughly, threats to do legal things that the threatener would likely do if the threat had never been made.

His prescient example is a reporter who has come up with "non-criminal embarrassing information". "If the subject decides he would rather pay than let the information become public, that's all to the good.

"An agreement to suppress the information is in the interests of both contracting parties, because the victim prefers paying the money to having the information divulged and the blackmailer prefers getting the money to revealing the information."

The only people who might be harmed by the agreement, Prof Elhauge argues, are third parties who would otherwise be able to discover the embarrassing information.

But when the information is salacious, he correctly notes, the public interest is lowest. Statutes that outlaw these deals, he says, are "overinclusive".

Prof Elhauge is far from the only theorist to suggest limits on what counts as illegal blackmail.

What's striking is how little influence these critical views have had on public policy. There's no constituency in favour of softening blackmail laws, even to allow agreements that leave both parties better off.

Why not? Perhaps the Bezos case provides an answer.

The traditional economic analysis of blackmail holds that restrictions are needed because, otherwise, parties would overinvest in uncovering embarrassing information for the sole purpose of seeking payment not to publish it.

By publishing the e-mails from the Enquirer, in all their grimy detail, Mr Bezos is arguing that this is such a situation.

The salacious photographs the Enquirer has threatened to publish have little value other than as a club to hold over his head.

Reading the e-mails, moreover, one has the sense that the tabloid was searching, rather desperately, for that club. Mr Bezos' investigation into how the Enquirer wound up with copies of private text messages seems to have stirred things up.

Thus, the blackmail isn't a simple request for cash in return for staying silent; it's an effort to quash a process that has the editors running scared. I don't suppose any journalist, at any point on the food chain, would much enjoy being investigated by the subject of an article.

If this were anyone other than the National Enquirer, I imagine that many in the news media would be decrying the intimidation attendant upon Mr Bezos' search for the tabloid's source. But they would be wrong.

A subject has as much right to look into a reporter as a reporter does to look into a subject. Now, the Enquirer doesn't dare publish, because doing so would look vindictive. The tabloid's parent company has promised a full investigation of whether anything illegal occurred – which is pretty much running up the white flag.

Maybe it is time for a victorious Mr Bezos to offer the Enquirer a deal: I'll drop my investigation if you promise never to mention me or any of my loved ones again. No doubt the Enquirer would cry foul. But the contract would leave both parties better off. BLOOMBERG

• Stephen L. Carter is a professor of law at Yale University.

Mr Jeff Bezos' probe into how the National Enquirer got copies of private text messages seems to have stirred things up.

At 40, Iran's decaying Islamic Republic is showing its age

Jason Rezaian

On Feb 11, 1979, an ageing Shi'ite cleric who had returned from long exile just 10 days earlier seized power in Teheran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran ushered in a new phase of tumult, confusion and terror in the Middle East that has lasted to this day.

Now, as Iran's Islamic revolution enters middle age, having weathered countless challenges, it finds itself on the wobbliest ground yet.

The Islamic Republic is not on the verge of collapse, as some are predicting. Nor is it in the midst of a rebirth. In fact, like so many others before it, the regime is experiencing an identity crisis of its own making.

The further it gets from the revolutionary moment of 1979, the more it sounds like an old man repeating the same stories to adult children who have grown impatient.

Iran was the first country in the modern era to embark on a unique experiment: a system of governance supposedly rooted in Islam and mechanisms of democracy.

Judging by current circumstances, Iran could also become the first country to see that experiment's complete failure and demise. But when?

The people of Iran saw through theocratic rule long ago. Yet, it remains unclear when the reign of the mullahs will expire.

Iranians want a freer, secular future that's integrated into the world order, specifically the global economy, but foreign adversaries and the regime's domestic partners – a network of mini-oligarchs, essentially – are standing in the way.

These 40 years have not been easy on Iranians. Current circumstances – including tough sanctions from the United States, misadventures in the region and the obstinance of the country's leaders – suggest that the next few years could be even harder.

From its earliest days, the Islamic Republic presented a spectacle of violence and fear. Show trials and mass executions followed Khomeini's ascension to power. Militant students stormed the US Embassy in Teheran and held 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days.

Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, sparking an eight-year war that did more than anything else to exacerbate the sectarian divides that still haunt the region.

All the while, though, Iran's shaky concept of rule by Quranic law was bolstered by attention to more worldly concerns, extending the system's power within its own borders.

Leaders bought a measure of loyalty from the populace by using the country's massive oil wealth to fund a wide range of public services. But that didn't mean Iranians necessarily bought into the belief system that provided a foundation for the regime.

Its most loyal subjects received favourable treatment, while the system's dissenters were quashed by execution, imprisonment or exile.

This ruthless approach went against the natural inclinations of one of the Middle East's most educated and sophisticated societies. But the regime remained viable because of an unspoken understanding: It subsidised a standard of living replete with nearly free access to utilities, basic food sources, medical care and education.

These resources weren't the best in the world, but they weren't too shabby, either.

People improved their lives where and how they could. When the opportunity presented itself, many left for life abroad. As the years passed, the authorities mostly stayed out of people's personal lives, especially when they came to understand they could capitalise on and profit from habits that were officially outlawed.

Alcohol, satellite dishes and, now, Internet access are officially outlawed or limited, but the black market in each is controlled by regime insiders.

What resulted from this hypocrisy was a society that was publicly pliant but defiant behind closed doors.

As long as the petrodollars flowed, it was an easy situation to control. Iran is again experiencing rocky times.

The Trump administration will tell you that sanctions have again pushed the regime to the brink, but that's not the whole story. The reality is that Iranian society is under pressure from all directions, domestic as well as foreign.

What Iranian officials won't tell you about is the growing wealth disparity, the depravity of a society conditioned to look out for No. 1.

These realities are enough to make Iranians one of the most forsaken peoples on earth. The sanctions and screeds emanating from Washington – usually as uninformed as they are disingenuous – only compound the challenges ordinary Iranians face. Meanwhile, it is the morally bankrupt regime and its quiet partners within Iranian society who profit.

The current system is directly responsible for the plight of women, ethnic and religious minorities and the country's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning communities. We can also blame much of the environmental degradation on the regime and the greed of its members.

Iran's biggest adversaries – Saudi Arabia and Israel, along with much of the US political establishment – fund and shape the conversation on Iran in Washington. We should not welcome lobbyists for the Islamic Republic to this turf, but we should seek to see completely independent, transparent, authentic and representative Iranian voices involved in the debate over the future of US policy towards Teheran. Right now, there is none. WASHINGTON POST

People visiting a Chinese temple in Denpasar on Bali island to mark the start of the Chinese New Year last Tuesday. Both presidential candidates Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto were coy about directly addressing the minority group in their tweeted greetings, avoiding addressing them as warga Tionghoa (Chinese Indonesians). PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Indonesia's Tionghoa tensions

The revival of identity politics and lingering prejudice against the ethnic Chinese community complicate campaigning for Jokowi

Leo Suryadinata

For The Straits Times

Both candidates in Indonesia's upcoming presidential election, Mr Joko "Jokowi" Widodo and Mr Prabowo Subianto, seek the support of ethnic Chinese Indonesians.

Yet, in a telling sign of the sensitive state of race relations, both fight shy of openly courting them, as reflected in their formal Lunar New Year greetings on Twitter.

Last Tuesday, President Joko tweeted: "Wishing those who celebrate Lunar New Year a Happy New Year! In this new year, our brotherhood (*persaudaraan kita*) will become more solid, full of joy, love and peace." Attached to the message was a cartoon of himself with a red and yellow barongsai (lion dance performer). It had the New Year greeting "Gong Xi Fa Cai" as a word bubble.

Mr Joko's latest greeting is largely similar to those of the previous two years. It was addressed to "those who celebrate the Lunar New Year", not to warga Tionghoa (Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent) or masyarakat Tionghoa (ethnic Chinese community). Nevertheless, this year saw an inclusive touch – he described his relationship with Chinese Indonesians as one of "brotherhood".

On the same day, Mr Prabowo tweeted his greeting: "Wishing my brothers who celebrate the Lunar New Year a Happy New Year." It was simple, unadorned with any illustration, and addressed to *saudara-saudara* (brothers). Again, there was no specific reference to Chinese Indonesians.

WHY NOT WARGA TIONGHOA?

Chinese Indonesian voters make up an estimated 2 per cent of 193 million eligible voters in the presidential election on April 17. While their numbers are relatively small, they do matter in tight races. Numbers aside, wealthy members of the community are sought after for campaign funds.

So, why then are both Mr Joko and Mr Prabowo so coy about directly addressing this minority group in their tweeted greetings? What is so problematic about using the term Tionghoa?

Before the end of his term in 2014, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had, in fact, issued a presidential decree to replace Mr Suharto's Cabinet circular issued in 1967 which called for the term "Cina" to be used for "China" and "ethnic Chinese" in place of "Tionghoa" (Chinese) and "Tiongkok" (China).

Identity politics looks to be behind a number of decisions in President Joko Widodo's (far left) re-election campaign. He decided on Dr Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative clergyman, to be his running mate. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

While Mr Joko Widodo may be sincere in his belief in pluralism, his campaign's compromises to win over conservative Muslims have alienated his base of moderate, socially liberal voters sufficiently to create a new problem for him. Many of them are talking about boycotting the election, a move that would benefit Mr Prabowo Subianto. Not surprisingly, as the election date draws closer, Mr Joko has begun urging his supporters not to skip the election.

"Cina" is considered derogatory by the community, and Dr Yudhoyono's 2014 decree put an end to it being used in official documents.

Many non-Chinese Indonesians and those in the mass media switched to using "Tionghoa" after the 2014 decree, but "Cina" continued to be used informally, in part because there was no penalty attached and in part because it has been in use for so long, many have grown accustomed to it. But there was also an element of resistance from politicians and others who still harboured deep prejudices against the community.

A big reason for this resistance is the legacy of three decades of Suharto rule. Under the former strongman, who was forced to step down in 1998, the Chinese community in Indonesia faced extensive discriminatory laws, including a ban on the celebration of Chinese festivals in public and the public use of the Chinese language.

Even though successive presidents since Mr Suharto have chipped away at the bans, anti-Chinese sentiments linger on.

The silence of Mr Joko and Mr Prabowo over the term "Tionghoa" acknowledges these sentiments and reflects a desire to avoid controversy. Mr Prabowo's followers are known to be less sympathetic to the Chinese Indonesians, but it is Mr Joko who faces greater pressure to tread carefully on the Tionghoa issue.

Mr Joko had to contend with attacks that he is too sympathetic towards the Chinese community long before he became president. A large part of it has to do with his friendship with Mr Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese Christian better known as Ahok, who was his deputy when he was Jakarta governor.

When Mr Joko became president in October 2014, Ahok succeeded him as governor but soon became a lightning rod for radical Islamists and opposition groups out to exploit anti-Chinese sentiments. Things came to a head in 2016 when Ahok was accused of blasphemy in a speech during the Jakarta gubernatorial election. Major protests were staged in Jakarta, once on Nov 4 and the other on Dec 2. The so-called 212 demonstration sealed Ahok's fate. He lost the election and was sentenced to jail for "blasphemy against Islam".

Also in 2016, a Chinese woman named Meliana from Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra triggered an anti-Chinese riot following her request that the volume of the loudspeaker for the call to prayers at a mosque be reduced.

Her house was torched and 14 Chinese temples were destroyed. Meliana was subsequently charged with "blasphemy against Islam" and sentenced to 18 months' jail. The verdict is being appealed against.

JOKOWI'S BALANCING ACT

The 212 demonstration is a watershed in Indonesian politics, marking the triumph of identity politics. What's noteworthy is that Mr Joko, in his 2016 New Year greetings, had used "masyarakat Tionghoa" in addressing Chinese Indonesians. After the December protests, he dropped it.

Identity politics looks to be behind a number of decisions in Mr Joko's re-election campaign. He decided on Dr Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative clergyman, to be his running mate. Conservative Islamic party Bintang Bulan led by Dr Yusril Mahendra also joined the Jokowi camp. The announcement of controversial plans for the early release of ageing terrorist leader Abu Bakar Bashir was likely motivated by a desire to secure the support of religious conservatives. It got nowhere after attracting a furious backlash.

While Mr Joko may be sincere in his belief in pluralism, his campaign's compromises to win over conservative Muslims have alienated his base of moderate, socially liberal voters sufficiently to create a new problem for him.

Many of them are talking about boycotting the election, a move that would benefit Mr Prabowo. Not surprisingly, as the election date draws closer, Mr Joko has begun urging his supporters not to skip the election.

Last Thursday, two days after his Twitter greeting, he attended a public Lunar New Year celebration for the first time since he became president. He addressed the Chinese-Indonesians at the event held at the Jakarta International Expo and used Mandarin to wish them a Happy New Year.

Underscoring the importance of Chinese Indonesian support, he repeated his call on all Indonesians (ethnic Chinese included) to turn up to vote on Election Day and not to cast blank ballots.

The troubles besetting Mr Joko's re-election campaign are a reflection of the continuing tensions over pluralism and the ethnic Chinese community's place in Indonesia.

For example, Forum Muslim Indonesia in Bogor, a conservative Islamic organisation, had called on the municipal government to ban Lunar New Year festivities there on the grounds that these were actually "religious festivals" that would undermine Islam. The local religious authorities and Bogor city government rejected the petition.

For Chinese Indonesians, this year's celebrations went ahead uninterrupted. But the tussle over the Tionghoa identity remains unresolved, and will remain a potential source of conflict now that identity politics has become the name of the game.

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What Finland found with its 'free money' experiment

Leonid Bershidsky

The first results of Finland's two-year experiment with a universal basic income (UBI) are in, and if they're confirmed by further research, they will probably hurt the unconditional income cause.

The trial run showed that "money for nothing" makes people happier, but doesn't inspire them to find work any more than traditional unemployment benefits would.

The Finnish experiment, conducted in 2017 and last year by Kela, the country's social insurance institution, was extremely important for world policymakers looking at variations of unconditional income as a way to offset job losses brought on by technological change.

So far, the only other large-scale experiment in a wealthy Western nation that could have rivalled it took place in the Canadian province of Ontario; participants were recruited by April last year – but after a change of government, the trial is being wound down prematurely.

This means the only solid data for researchers interested in how UBI works in industrialised nations is from Finland.

Perhaps, the most important parameters for policymakers in the data concern the unconditional income's effect on employment and on the government's social spending.

On both these counts, the Finnish experiment failed to produce a breakthrough for UBI proponents, in part because of its flawed design.

Finland paid 2,000 unemployment benefit recipients €560 (S$860) a month without requiring them to go through the bureaucracy involved in applying for the traditional benefits, and regardless of whether they landed a job.

Given a median income of €2,900, this is well below the poverty level. But recipients didn't have to give up other social benefits such as social assistance, housing and sickness allowances. They could even continue to apply for unemployment benefits if the amount due to them was higher than the basic income, a frequent situation for families with children.

This worked to muddy the UBI's effect: It didn't really pull people out of dire poverty or rid them of the cumbersome welfare bureaucracy.

So far, Kela and a group of academics from Finnish universities studying the results of the experiment have analysed only one full year of data. It's possible that data for last year will alter their conclusions, but, based on 2017, UBI hasn't increased people's propensity to find work.

People in the treatment group (UBI recipients) worked an average of 49.64 days in 2017, while people in the control group (those on traditional benefits) worked 49.25 days.

There were no significant differences in their earnings, either. The basic income recipients, on average, got €16,159 from the government in 2017, including the UBI; people in the control group received €11,337. This means the government spent an additional €5,000 per experiment participant to get the same labour market outcome. Few policymakers would be inspired by such a result.

Other parts of the study are less discouraging. The Finnish researchers also did a survey of treatment and control group members at the end of last year to assess their subjective sense of well-being after two years of the experiment.

The survey showed significant improvements in how people felt about their health and prospects if they received the unconditional income.

The UBI recipients' self-reporting indicated they were more optimistic, more interested in finding full-time work and less stressed than their peers on traditional unemployment benefits. They even showed more trust in politicians (although still less than the general population).

The survey results should probably be taken with a grain of salt because of the low response rate to the researchers' questionnaire – just 31 per cent of the treatment group and 20 per cent in the control group. It's possible that self-selection bias interfered: People who were relatively happy with the experiment responded in greater numbers than those who weren't.

For example, 30 per cent of the respondents who had received a basic income were working at the time they were surveyed; only 25 per cent of the control group respondents were employed.

Intuitively, however, it seems right that people who feel secure about even a small income display more optimism and report they're functioning better. And some hard data confirms this, too: UBI recipients claimed only an average of €121 in sickness allowances in 2017, compared with €216 for non-recipients.

The question governments need to ask is whether a "soft" outcome – considerably happier, less depressed people at the bottom of the income ladder – is worth a significant increase in social system costs.

Obviously, a decrease in jobless rates or a demonstrable improvement in the quality of jobs the unemployed eventually land would be a much stronger argument for an unconditional income.

But in some advanced societies, more happiness also could be judged a desirable enough result to justify an increase in the tax burden. BLOOMBERG

The question governments need to ask is whether a "soft" outcome – considerably happier, less depressed people at the bottom of the income ladder – is worth a significant increase in social system costs.

BIG PICTURE

WEATHER
Windy, with passing showers in the afternoon.
High 34 deg C **Low** 24 deg C
24-hr PSI as of 5pm yesterday: 29 to 54 (Moderate)

PHOTO: REUTERS

I, robot, the budding artist

Can robots be creative?

British gallery owner Aidan Meller hopes to go some way towards answering that question with Ai-Da, a robot whose makers say will be able to draw people from sight with a pencil in its bionic hand.

Mr Meller is overseeing the final stages of Ai-Da's construction by engineers from British robot maker Engineered Arts, reported Reuters.

Mr Meller calls Ai-Da – named after British mathematician and computer pioneer Ada Lovelace – the world's first "AI ultra-realistic robot artist", and his ambition is for it to perform like its human equivalents. "She is going to actually be drawing, and we are hoping to then build technology for her to paint," he added.

Ai-Da will present its inaugural exhibition Unsecured Futures in May at the University of Oxford.

I toured the home of master potter Iskandar Jalil.

Toh Wen Li
Journalist
The Straits Times

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MRT network sets new high in reliability

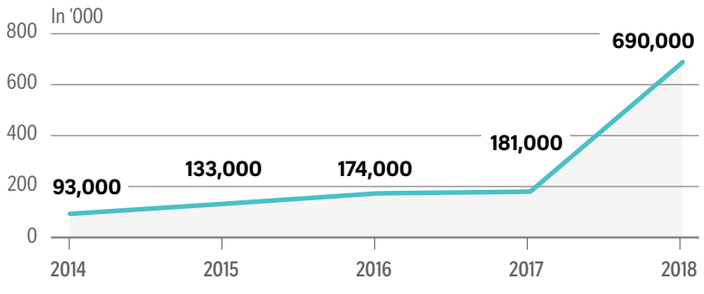
Trains clock average 690,000km between delays last year – up 3.8 times from 2017

Christopher Tan
Senior Transport Correspondent

The stark improvement in MRT train reliability came on the back of asset renewal programmes, additional train runs and completion of new lines. The North East Line was the star performer in terms of reliability. ST FILE PHOTO

Rail service reliability

Mean distance travelled between delays >5 min (train-km) for overall MRT network



Number of service delays (>30 min)

	Overall MRT network	NSL	EWL	NEL	CCL	DTL	Overall LRT network	BPLRT	SPLRT
2017	**16**	6	5	3	2	0	**11**	6	5
2018	**9**	0	4	2	1	2	**11**	8	3

SOURCE: LTA STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

The MRT network hit a new high in a measure of reliability last year, with trains clocking an average of 690,000km between delays – 3.8 times better than the year before.

The stark improvement was on the back of asset renewal programmes, additional train runs and completion of new lines.

The North East Line (NEL) was the star performer, chalking nearly 1.4 million train-km between delays of more than five minutes each, according to figures the Land Transport Authority released yesterday.

The new Downtown Line was next, with 928,000km, followed closely by the North-South Line with 894,000km and Circle Line with 728,000km.

The East-West Line – the last to have its resignalling upgrade done – clocked 408,000km between delays, but is expected to show continuous improvement. The oldest North-South Line posted the best improvement – jumping from 89,000km between delays in 2017 to 894,000km last year.

Meanwhile, there were nine major delays (over 30 minutes) on the network – down from 16 in 2017.

The LRT network on the whole showed an improvement too, with 82,000 car-km clocked between delays. The Sengkang and Punggol LRT rose from 115,000km to 216,000km, but the entire network was pulled down by weaker performance on the Bukit Panjang LRT. The latter hit 43,000km between delays – down from 53,000km.

Singapore University of Social Sciences transport economist Walter Theseira said: "With completion of resignalling and other needed works, we are now reaping the benefits of these investments.

"But I think we need to also pay attention to the human impact of these disruptions as an incident has very different implication depending on what time of day it occurs and how long."

The Nominated MP added: "So once we get to higher mean kilometres between failure (MKBF) reliability, I think it's time to develop more fine-grained measurements so we don't lose sight of what is important."

Other observers have also pointed out that train speeds have not reverted to pre-2011 levels, and overcrowdedness – especially during morning peaks – remains an issue with commuters.

Marketing and communications head Eugene Mok, 33, said: "There are fewer delays and breakdowns from 2017, but am not sure if it is now four times better... 2017, after all, was disastrous with all the delays caused by engineering works."

IT consultant Davis Li, 35, said he too feels there has been an improvement. "Even the East-West Line is smoother and the air-con is stronger now."

But Mr Li noted that journey time between Tampines and Jurong East – his daily commute – is still "five to 10 minutes longer" than stated.

At a recent signing ceremony for a mid-life upgrade of North East Line trains, Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan said: "When I set this stretch target of one million train-km, it was not plucked from the sky. I took a look at how the other good MRT lines in other cities performed. To be able to achieve it consistently, very, very few metros have been able to do it and I thought in order to motivate our staff, I deliberately chose this very stretch target of one million MKBF.

"And now, to be able to see at least one of our lines, NEL, performing this achievement, I must commend Land Transport Authority, SBS Transit and the respective original equipment suppliers for this sterling performance."

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Asean should do all it can to be a "neutral place where people from elsewhere can come and be engaged in the region", says Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing. PHOTOS: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Asean can learn from Mid-East woes, says Chan Chun Sing

He adds that regional bloc should not end up as a battleground for proxy contests

Goh Sui Noi
East Asia Editor

Singapore and Asean can draw a lesson from the unstable situation in the Middle East – that a region needs to have cohesion if it does not want to be a platform for proxy contests by major powers, said Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing.

The intra-regional rivalry and lack of unity in the Middle East – together with its strategic location and abundant energy resources – have made it a proxy battleground for extra-regional powers, he said at the annual conference of the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore yesterday.

The Middle East, through its long history, has seen attempts to dominate it by people as diverse as the Egyptians, Persians, Arabs, British and French principally because of its strategic location at the confluence of Europe, Asia and Africa.

Its location has meant that it controls the critical "strategic lines of communications" (SLOC) in land, sea and air, he said in his keynote speech on the first day of the two-day meeting that brought together over 300 academics, think-tankers, diplomats and business people.

Mr Chan said that many, if not all, global and regional powers in history "desire to secure their interests in the region that include lines of communications, energy and even religious authority".

"Since the Middle East has seldom been united, it has also become a convenient proxy battleground for wider global geopolitical contests," he added.

With China's interests in the Middle East growing – including in SLOC, energy resources and religion, particularly the influence of Islam on China's Muslim minorities – the Asian power could come up against the United States' many interests in this region.

"Both the US and China have interests in the Middle East that are sometimes shared and, at other times, contested as part of a wider global backdrop of cooperation and contest," he said.

Later, during the question and answer session, he drew a parallel between the Middle East and South-east Asia as strategic locations, the Middle East with its Suez Canal and South-east Asia with the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait – all important shipping lanes.

One lesson that can be drawn from the Middle East experience, he said, is that if the region is not integrated and coherent, it can become a platform for proxy contests.

"It is in the interest of Asean countries to work closely together to make sure that we can chart our way forward, without which we may end up being a battleground for proxy contests."

Asean should do all it can to be a "neutral place where people from elsewhere can come and be engaged in the region", he said.

He also touched on Singapore and how its survival depended on the country staying connected with the rest of the world and making the world its hinterland.

"For the world to be truly our hinterland, we must have a deep understanding of what's happening around the world, not just the US and China or Europe, but many of these other places like Middle East, Central Asian republics, and also increasingly Africa," he said.

Nearer home, Singapore has been playing a role in China's development. But, as China's needs evolved, so has Singapore's relevance to it, noted Mr Chan.

Singapore has gone from building the Suzhou Industrial Park in the early days of China's development in the 1990s to the Tianjin Eco-city, initiated in 2007, which epitomised China's desire for sustainable development, he said.

It has since gone beyond geographically bound projects to the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative to connect China's western provinces to countries in South-east Asia.

As for the Republic's role in China's next lap of development, Mr Chan pointed to its participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative to build infrastructure in Asia, Africa and Europe.

> WORKING CLOSELY TOGETHER
>
> **It is in the interest of Asean countries to work closely together to make sure that we can chart our way forward, without which we may end up being a battleground for proxy contests.**
>
> MINISTER FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY CHAN CHUN SING

"This is one area where Singapore can contribute to China, in its outward push in its connectivity to the rest of the world," he said.

Another area that is of interest to China is how Singapore has continued to remain successful and cohesive with its diverse and multi-ethnic population.

"China finds us quite interesting," he said. "They try to understand how we can keep a multi-ethnic, multiracial society together, one that does not have a lot of common history (but is) united by a common vision, a set of values, meritocracy, incorruptibility, multiracialism," Mr Chan added.

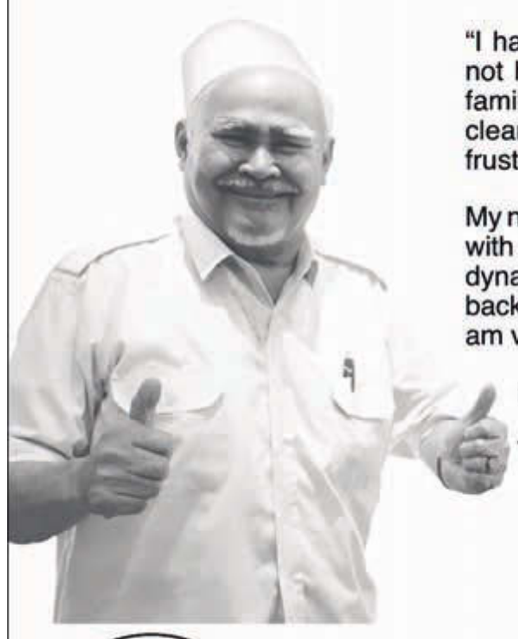
This is as China is also looking at ways to maintain its social stability amid disparate forces that threaten to pull its society apart.

As for Singapore, it needs to remain successful if it is to stay relevant to China and the rest of the world, he said.

It is only when Singapore is successful that others will find it interesting, he added.

suinoi@sph.com.sg

I Can Hear Clearly Now!



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The well-being of both states and students depends ultimately on the individual and is not a function of size, says Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

Rules are key, like at school: Ong Ye Kung

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent

Likening foreign affairs to a schoolyard, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said yesterday that small states – like young children – thrive best in an orderly environment with clear rules.

But the well-being of both states and students depends ultimately on the individual and is not a function of size, he added. "If you do your schoolwork well, you submit your homework on time and are helpful to the rest of your classmates, chances are, the teacher will know you... and your friends will watch your back," he said.

In the same vein, Singapore is determined to make itself relevant and important to the world despite its small size, said Mr Ong, adding that foreign policy begins at home.

"Ultimately, it is about how our country is run, how cohesive our society is and what value we can bring to the world."

Speaking at the annual conference of the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, he also highlighted how technology has fundamentally changed politics around the world.

Now, politics is at risk of becoming a "round-the-clock competition in public relations as opposed to a contest of big ideas for the future... a divisive rather than unifying force". Voters are "bombarded with excessive information of varying accuracies" and may not be sure if they are getting the right information to make informed decisions.

The narrow interests of small groups "can somehow go viral and be amplified to dominate the national agenda", he said. And using big data, campaign managers can "slice and dice" their voter bases into tiny segments.

"The result is an explosion of issues, causes and interests," Mr Ong said. "When technology shrinks politics to that nano level or even smaller, we can imagine democracy starting to break down too."

He said he believes democracy is healthiest when it functions as a "contest of big ideas".

In the ideal democracy, voters pick the best leaders, the losers compromise and respect the results, and society unites and moves forward, he said.

The conference, which ends today, is on China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East. It addresses topics such as China's policy towards Muslims and the broader geopolitical context.

Mr Ong also spoke on relations between China and the United States, and how the move from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources will impact the Middle East.

The US and China are not likely to go to war as there is an "unprecedented level of interdependency" between them, he said. And despite the intense competition, both countries may eventually find that they have no fundamentally irreconcilable conflict of interest.

"Technology may well be the centrepiece of the contest between the powers in years to come, and there has to be peaceful platforms for both sides to work out such issues," he said.

He also said there will be a long-term shift away from oil as an energy source and that many Middle Eastern countries are already trying to reduce economic dependence on oil and gas.

This shift will change the way the US engages with the Middle East, which will in turn affect US-China relations, he said.

Mr Ong also took part in a dialogue, during which he was asked questions such as how Singapore has handled the challenges that have come about from digital transformation.

In response, he underlined the importance of initiatives such as SkillsFuture to help people catch up with technology. "For you to move forward, leverage on this whole new technology, transform your economy, you've got to bring everyone along," he said. "Digital transformation and the digital revolution makes that a lot harder."

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Toxic bacteria found on plastics at beaches

Tiny pieces of plastic had bacteria that can bleach coral or infect wounds in humans

Cheryl Teh

Toxic bacteria capable of causing coral bleaching and wound infections in humans have been found on microplastics picked up from Singapore's coastline between April and July last year.

Marine scientists at the National University of Singapore (NUS) found more than 400 different types of bacteria on 275 pieces of microplastics collected from three beaches – Lazarus Island, Sembawang Beach and Changi Beach.

The plastic items were smaller than 5mm each.

During this six-month study, the team attempted to examine the bacterial communities on microplastics collected from coastal regions of Singapore.

Using DNA sequencing, the scientists found the bacterium *Photobacterium rosenbergii*, often associated with coral bleaching and disease.

The research team also found species of marine *Vibrio* – known to be a major cause of wound infections in humans – and species of *Arcobacter*, a bacterium known to cause gastroenteritis.

The team consists of Dr Sandric Leong, research lead and senior research fellow at the NUS Tropical Marine Science Institute, and Ms Emily Curren, a PhD student at the institute and the Department of Biological Sciences at the NUS Faculty of Science.

Ms Curren said: "As the microplastics we studied were collected from locations easily accessible to the public and in areas widely used for recreation, the identification of potentially pathogenic bacteria is important to prevent the spread of diseases."

She added that the microplastics originated from disposable forks, spoons and straws, which can take hundreds of years to biodegrade.

There are currently more than 150 million tonnes of plastics in the ocean, said the researchers.

Microplastics in aquatic environments, in particular, pose a real problem. They take much longer to degrade due to salty conditions and lower temperatures, and are also a habitable surface for marine bacteria to colonise.

These bits and pieces of plastic become "vehicles" for the toxic bacteria to thrive.

When accidentally swallowed by fish, mussels and shrimp, the researchers say, these harmful bacteria could find their way up the food chain – to humans.

Dr Leong said: "Microplastics form a large population of plastic pollution in marine environments.

"Marine organisms may consume bits of microplastics unintentionally and this could lead to the accumulation and subsequent transfer of marine pathogens in the food chain.

"Understanding the distribution of microplastics and identifying the organisms attached to them are crucial steps in managing plastic pollution on a national and global scale," Dr Leong added.

But toxic bacteria are not all that are found on microplastics.

Species of the bacteria *Erythrobacter*, which is capable of degrading plastic, and *Pseudomonas veronii*, which has been used to clean up oil spills, were found.

Ms Curren said: "Given the predicted increase in plastic waste contamination in oceans, the discovery of such bacteria provides important nature-friendly alternatives for the mitigation of plastic pollution and toxic pollutants."

tienli@sph.com.sg

PhD student Emily Curren examining microplastic samples collected from coastal areas of Singapore. The plastic items, smaller than 5mm each, form a habitable surface for marine bacteria to colonise. PHOTO: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

MAKING THEIR WAY INTO THE FOOD CHAIN

Marine organisms may consume bits of microplastics unintentionally and this could lead to the accumulation and subsequent transfer of marine pathogens in the food chain. Understanding the distribution of microplastics and identifying the organisms attached to them are crucial steps in managing plastic pollution on a national and global scale.

DR SANDRIC LEONG, research lead and senior research fellow at the NUS Tropical Marine Science Institute.

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Parliament in numbers

800,000
Number of scripts marked by overseas educators engaged by Cambridge Assessment out of about 1.1 million N/O/A-level scripts every year.

91 complaints
about misdelivered and lost mail received by SingPost last year.

2%
The average proportion of servicemen who were punished for safety lapses every year for the last three years.

600
The average number of child abuse cases investigated every year in the last five years.

2
The number of employment agencies the Manpower Ministry has taken action against since 2016 for failing to state their refund policies for salaries paid in advance by employers of domestic workers.

78
The average number of elder abuse cases investigated every year since 2015.

$2,000
The median rent hawkers at the seven new social enterprise hawker centres pay a month.

STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Standards may be set for parcel, registered mail delivery

Complaints over such services up; postal quality benchmarks cover only basic local letters for now

SingPost could not give the specific number of complaints it received on failed parcel and registered mail delivery notices, but Ms Sim Ann, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, said "there are likely to be more incidents which were not formally reported".

Tiffany Fumiko Tay

The delivery of parcels and registered mail may soon have to meet regulatory standards, following recent complaints and a $100,000 fine handed to Singapore Post for service standard failures that covered only basic local letters.

The recent lapses by the postal service provider involved services which are covered by the Infocomm Media Development Authority's (IMDA) Postal Quality of Service standards, as well as those that are not, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information Sim Ann said yesterday.

The IMDA received eight complaints last year about people getting notices that parcels and registered mail could not be delivered to them even when there was someone at home. In 2017, there were seven such complaints.

But SingPost could not give the specific number of complaints it received on such failed delivery notices, Ms Sim noted. "Nonetheless, we believe that there are likely to be more incidents which were not formally reported," she said in Parliament, adding that the IMDA will pay attention to this area as well.

Ms Sim was replying to Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) on instances of missing mail and the misuse of failed postal delivery notices when recipients were at home.

She also said that SingPost received 91 complaints about misdelivered and lost mail last year, and it investigated each complaint and redelivered mail that was found.

SingPost has to deliver between 98 per cent and 99 per cent of basic local letters in one working day, and 100 per cent in two working days. SingPost failed to meet these requirements in nine instances in 2017, resulting in it receiving a $100,000 fine, its highest fine to date, last Thursday. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Under the IMDA's Postal Quality of Service standards, SingPost has to deliver 98 per cent to 99 per cent of basic local letters in one working day, and 100 per cent in two working days. It failed to meet these requirements in nine instances in 2017, resulting in SingPost receiving its highest fine to date last Thursday.

IMDA said it is assessing SingPost's performance for last year, and the results will be published in the middle of this year.

SingPost announced a raft of measures on the day it was fined, in a move to improve its service quality in the coming three to six months.

The measures include hiring an extra 100 postmen and extending mail delivery slots to weekday evenings and on Saturdays.

SingPost has been widely criticised in recent months for several incidents, including discarded mail and undistributed business fliers.

Ms Sim said SingPost's board and management agree with the Government that a thorough review of its operations and manpower must be made, even as it takes immediate steps to remedy the service lapses.

Ms Denise Phua (Jalan Besar GRC) asked if the ministry would consider facilitating alternative delivery agents and systems, like a trial she introduced in her Central Singapore District, where senior citizens were employed to "drop mail in their localities".

"The outcomes were quite good... There is good potential to create reliable delivery systems (and) employ seniors and also graduates of special education schools," said Ms Phua, who is mayor of the district.

Ms Sim said she will ask the IMDA to work closely with the Central Singapore Community Development Council to look at how it can improve postal services.

Postmen now do more doorstep deliveries because of the growth in e-commerce, with about 38,000 items unable to fit into letterboxes a day and work becoming increasingly labour-intensive, she noted.

SingPost needs to make itself ready for this new operating environment, and the IMDA will provide training and other support where needed, she said.

Ms Lee noted that SingPost's lapses had been raised in Parliament as early as 2017 but the situation has gone "from bad to worse".

Ms Sim said it may take time before they are fully addressed.

Further regulatory action from the IMDA can be expected, she added, as it reviews SingPost's letter delivery performance for last year, investigates infringements under the Postal Services Act and considers extra regulatory standards.

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SingPost not the only mail operator

Singapore Post does not have a monopoly on basic letter services, as there are three others licensed to deliver such letters here, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information Sim Ann said yesterday.

SingPost is Singapore's only public postal licensee, which means its obligations include maintaining postal boxes, issuing stamps and delivering basic letters to and from anyone in Singapore, she said.

However, Asendia Singapore, DHL eCommerce (Singapore) and World Marketing Group hold Postal Services Operations licences, which allow them to deliver letters weighing up to 500g.

Services offered by the three companies include business mail and direct mail for marketers.

The Straits Times understands that SingPost delivers most of the letters here.

When Singapore's postal service was privatised in 1992, SingPost received a 15-year exclusive right to conduct domestic and international basic mail services. The market was opened up in 2007, letting other players apply for a licence.

Parcel delivery, meanwhile, is an "open and competitive segment", with many firms offering door-to-door service, Ms Sim said in Parliament.

She was responding to Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) on how to prevent the provider of an essential service from becoming complacent, and what circumstances would prompt the revocation of SingPost's licence.

But SingPost's failure to meet government standards does not warrant revoking its licence at the moment, Ms Sim added.

SingPost renewed its licence in 2017 for 20 years.

Tiffany Fumiko Tay

Environment studies to be made public unless there are security concerns

Rachel Au-Yong
Housing Correspondent

The authorities intend to make public the findings of environmental impact assessments (EIAs) unless there are specific reasons – like security considerations – to keep them confidential, said Second Minister for National Development Desmond Lee yesterday.

This is the first time security considerations have been cited as a factor for withholding the results of environmental studies.

Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) had asked if the authorities would consider making EIAs mandatory for all construction works near national parks or nature reserves, as well as publicly available.

Mr Lee's response comes in the wake of disputes over the Housing Board's conclusion in a report that forests in Tengah, which is near a military training ground, were of "low conservation significance".

But ecologists consider the forests there an important vegetation node that allows wildlife to move from the Western Catchment to the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.

The report also noted that common animals like wild boars and monitor lizards thrive in the Tengah forests; ecologists say these are not the only animals there.

The HDB, which launched 1,620 flats in Tengah last November, released key findings by Aecom, an independent consultant, last October. But it did not issue the full report despite multiple requests from environmental groups.

Yesterday, Mr Ng asked if the authorities could release the full report on Tengah without the sensitive data, to address the disputed findings about the environmental impact of clearing secondary forests for Singapore's first "forest town" for public housing.

Mr Lee replied: "For Tengah, the findings of the Environmental Baseline Study were shared with the public thorough the media in October last year, and we will also be engaging the nature groups to share with them the details."

A ministry spokesman later told The Straits Times that the HDB will be sharing more details with nature groups by next month.

"As you know, Tengah is and remains a military training ground," he added, without elaborating on any security considerations.

Earlier, Mr Lee said developers of projects near sensitive areas, including nature reserves and marine and coastal areas, are required to undergo an in-depth consultation with relevant agencies to discuss the scope of works, possible environmental impact and corresponding mitigating measures.

"If the potential environmental impact of a project is assessed to be significant, we will require the project developer to conduct further environmental studies to thoroughly assess the nature and magnitude of the impact, and to implement more extensive mitigating measures to address it," he said.

There has been tension over other environmental studies.

Nature groups pointed to the lack of clarity of terms used and lack of consideration of the Singapore context in two separate EIA reports released months apart in 2016.

The first looked at the potential impact of tunnelling through the Central Catchment Nature Reserve to build the Cross Island MRT Line, while the second was on the impact the Mandai hub of wildlife parks would have on wildlife and environment.

Both cases also raised the question of how transparent such reports should be.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) and Mandai Park Holdings made their respective EIAs available, but LTA did so only after members of the public complained about limited access to the document.

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Abuse of children, the elderly on the rise: Faishal Ibrahim

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) investigated about 600 child abuse cases on average each year over the past five years.

The ministry also investigated an average of 78 cases of abuse each year, involving people over the age of 65, since the Adult Protective Service was set up in 2015.

These numbers have been on an upward trend, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development Faishal Ibrahim said in Parliament yesterday.

The spike in numbers can be attributed to efforts to raise awareness about these issues, he added.

Responding to questions from Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar (Ang Mo Kio GRC), Dr Faishal said the majority of both child and elder abuse cases involve physical abuse or neglect.

Nearly 90 per cent of perpetrators in child abuse cases were parents or step-parents.

For elder abuse, 80 per cent of perpetrators were the victims' family members, including children and spouses.

On raising awareness, Dr Faishal said videos from the MSF campaign Break The Silence have notched up 14.2 million views.

Stakeholders like educators and social workers are also being trained to better respond to and engage potential victims.

He said: "MSF will continue to work closely with families and community partners to keep individuals safe."

Dr Faishal added that the Vulnerable Adults Act, which came into effect last December, is another mechanism to protect vulnerable adults when families and community partners are unable to do so.

Rachel Au-Yong

No need to list all side effects: Lam Pin Min

MOH to discuss issues with medical profession to prevent defensive practices

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

The recent case of a doctor who was fined $100,000 for not telling his patient of the side effects of a common injection does not mean doctors have to list every possible side effect or complication of a drug or treatment, said Senior Minister of State for Health Lam Pin Min.

Four MPs had asked about the impact of the Singapore Medical Council's (SMC) disciplinary tribunal's decision, which has sparked concerns among many doctors here that it would lead to more defensive practices henceforth.

Responding yesterday, Dr Lam said: "It is wrong to infer that the decision makes it mandatory for a doctor to lay out and get the consent of a patient for every possible side effect and potential complications of a drug or treatment."

The SMC had fined Dr Lim Lian Arn, an orthopaedic surgeon in private practice, $100,000 after he pleaded guilty to a charge of professional misconduct for not telling his patient of possible side effects of a commonly given steroid injection.

Doctors have sent a petition to the Ministry of Health on the matter.

Doctors generally do not tell patients about side effects which are both transient and fairly rare, as with this injection.

Speaking in Parliament, Dr Lam noted that Dr Lim had admitted he was guilty of failing to inform the patient of any risks and complications that could arise from the injection.

"He was not found guilty for failing to inform the patient of all possible complications," the Senior Minister of State added.

Dr Lam acknowledged that "there can be questions as to whether this ($100,000) was too high a fine, and why the SMC was asking for a five-month suspension".

The doctors' concerns are understandable, he said, "when considering the facts and circumstances of this case".

He added: "Many fair-minded doctors would think that the penalty imposed was harsh."

Last month, the SMC set up of a Sentencing Guidelines Committee which will "help in ensuring consistency and fairness in the sentences meted, and improve transparency and rigour in the disciplinary process", said Dr Lam.

He pointed out that the medical disciplinary process is self-regulated, and that complaints committees (CC) and disciplinary tribunals (DT) make their decisions independent of the SMC.

In the past six years, the CCs looked into over 900 complaints and sent 8 per cent to DTs, with the profession accepting most of their sentences. Questions were raised in only a few cases, Dr Lam said.

But as the ministry does not want to see the practice of defensive medicine here, it will "discuss the issues" with the profession.

Dr Lam said: "We acknowledge that the profession needs assurance on what the legal position is, and what the procedures/punishments are when disciplinary proceedings are undertaken."

>900

Number of cases the complaints committees looked into in the past six years. Of these, 8 per cent were sent to disciplinary tribunals, with the profession accepting most of their sentences.

Non-Constituency MP Daniel Goh asked what would happen in the event that a doctor does not inform a patient about one side effect on a list of possible complications, and that particular side effect ends up affecting the patient.

Replying, Dr Lam reiterated that there is no need for doctors to list all side effects.

"What's important is that the doctor needs to inform the patient of complications or side effects that are relevant to the patient," he said.

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang GRC) said that while the profession is self-regulated, the Ministry of Health (MOH) should nevertheless have oversight. In this case, the $100,000 fine "is excessive", he said, asking if the ministry would consider re-opening this case.

There is no need to do so, said Dr Lam, as both parties have accepted the judgment.

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One of the seven new social enterprise hawker centres is at Our Tampines Hub. Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources Amy Khor said yesterday in Parliament that the $750 to $3,700 monthly rents at such hawker centres are comparable to the $1,700 median rent at similar government-run hawker centres. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

SEHC costs comparable to other hawker centres'

Cheryl Teh

Hawkers at the seven new social enterprise hawker centres (SEHCs) pay rents that range from $750 to $3,700 a month.

This works out to a median – the mid-point between a range – rent of $2,000 a month, Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources Amy Khor said in Parliament yesterday.

This is comparable to the $1,700 median rent at similar hawker centres, after taking into account the bigger and better-designed stalls, and amenities at SEHCs, she added.

She also said rents of non-subsidised hawker stalls at similar government-run centres range from $640 to $3,900 a month.

Her reply to Mr Faisal Manap (Aljunied GRC) follows public criticism last October of SEHCs' onerous hawker contracts.

Elaborating on other expenses, Dr Khor said ancillary costs, such as service and conservancy charges (S&CC) and table-cleaning fees, are similar at all hawker centres.

S&CC charges at the new centres are between $110 and $350 a month, which is within the monthly range of $130 to $450 at government-run centres.

With table-cleaning, the fees at the new centres are between $300 and $550 a month, which is within the monthly range of $200 to $830 at government-run centres.

"As for other operating expenses incurred directly by stallholders such as utilities, manpower and raw materials, these would vary from stall to stall, depending on factors such as the nature of business and market conditions," she added.

Mr Faisal had asked for rent details of government-run hawker centres and SEHCs, and their operating expenses. SEHCs are jointly run by Hawker Management by Koufu, Fei Siong Social Enterprise, NTUC Foodfare, Timbre+Hawkers and OTMH by Kopitiam.

Last October, they received flak for contracts which the hawkers said forced them to work long hours and shoulder the burden of expensive dish-washing, tray return and marketing costs.

The National Environment Agency, which oversees hawker centres here, stepped in and required SEHC contracts to be changed to allow for shorter work hours, limit fines and damages imposed on hawkers, and share part of the dish-washing costs with hawkers.

Dr Khor said the Productive Hawker Centre grants have been extended to SEHC hawkers to help them better manage their costs.

From Jan 1 this year, the stallholders will see a halving in the cost of the centralised dish-washing service and next year, by 30 per cent.

The grants will help "overcome the labour constraints the hawkers will increasingly face, and can go a long way in sustaining our hawker trade to serve the needs of Singaporeans", Dr Khor said, adding that hiring a dishwasher could go up to $1,500 a month.

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Reformative training law may be reversed

Selina Lum
Law Correspondent

Young offenders who are sentenced to reformative training can no longer have their stint backdated to take time spent in custody into account, if proposed tweaks to criminal procedure tabled in Parliament yesterday are passed.

This would reverse a new law to allow backdating of reformative training sentences that took effect in October last year as part of wider reforms of the criminal justice system.

Reformative training is a strict regimen aimed at rehabilitating offenders below the age of 21 who commit relatively serious crimes.

Up till last year, it has been the practice for sentencing courts not to backdate reformative training sentences, which could last between 18 months and three years.

This changed when more than 50 diverse reforms to the Criminal Procedure Code were approved by Parliament in March last year. Changes related to reformative training include reducing the minimum detention period from 18 months to six or 12 months and providing for backdating if the offender had spent time in remand before being sentenced.

Now, the Ministry of Law has recommended that the legislation be amended to remove the possibility of backdating a reformative training sentence.

"Backdating reformative training sentences shortens the time spent by the offender in prescribed rehabilitation programmes, and may prevent them from completing these programmes as designed," the ministry said.

Agencies will work together to ensure that remand is avoided or minimised in cases where reformative training is likely to be imposed.

The amendments are being proposed to fine-tune processes introduced or changed when the Criminal Justice Reform Act was passed last year.

Another key amendment relates to video-recorded interviews of suspects – the main change introduced in the reforms.

Currently, only the police have the power to investigate any unauthorised recording of the interview process or unauthorised copying or distribution of a video statement.

The ministry has now proposed allowing prescribed law enforcement agencies, such as the Central Narcotics Bureau, to probe offences relating to the video recording of interviews.

Another amendment proposes allowing sensitive information to be removed from materials disclosed to the defence, including material that can compromise national safety or public order.

The amendments will set out the mechanism for resolving disputes in court if the defence wants to challenge the removal of such information. Sensitive information cannot be removed in situations where the prosecution intends to rely on it or where it can strengthen the defence's case.

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Law to tackle money laundering passed

Zaihan Mohamed Yusof

Dealers in precious stones and metals will have to register with the Law Ministry and carry out stricter checks on clients under new laws passed in Parliament yesterday.

Senior Minister of State for Law Edwin Tong said the ministry has streamlined the requirements in the Precious Stones and Precious Metals (Prevention of Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing) Bill, based on industry feedback.

For instance, the registration process will go fully digital, thereby reducing the burden of compliance.

The law is part of efforts to boost Singapore's standards of anti-money laundering and countering the finance of terrorism.

Mr Tong said his ministry will continue to work with dealers of precious stones and metals to help them comply with the new rules.

Dealers had raised concerns during a month-long public consultation held in September last year.

Mr Tong said the authorities will also, where appropriate, provide materials in different languages, as well as issue templates and checklists, to help industry players better appreciate and implement the measures.

These will include details on how to perform proper customer due-diligence checks and risk assessments and implement internal policies, procedures and controls.

Regular seminars, outreach sessions and dialogues will also be held with jewellers, bullion traders, retailers and auctioneers.

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah GRC) said "clarity is important for compliance and effective regulation, yet it is vital that these new regulations do not unduly curb businesses' creativity when designing products".

He also asked if the laws cover individuals who buy precious stones or precious minerals in one-off or resale transactions. Mr Tong said it does not target such individuals.

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok) had asked what expectations were being placed on dealers to uncover individuals who make multiple purchases without exceeding the existing $20,000 threshold for filing cash transaction reports.

While noting that it may not be practical to require regulated dealers to share information on buyers' identities with rivals, Mr Pillai suggested "pooling information".

Mr Tong said Mr Pillai's suggestion "might be a better way to try to link the different transactions, should (they) occur".

The Law Ministry will issue guidance on how personal information should be obtained, handled and kept, he added.

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CRL extension to Punggol being studied

Zhaki Abdullah

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) is still studying whether the future Cross Island Line (CRL) can be extended from Pasir Ris to Punggol.

Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan yesterday said in a written parliamentary reply that engineering studies are ongoing for this proposed stretch of the CRL.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio GRC), had asked if the Thomson-East Coast Line (TEL) could be extended to connect to Pasir Ris and Punggol, to provide greater connectivity for residents in these areas.

Mr Khaw, who is also the Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure, said there are no plans to extend the 43km line – which will end at Sungei Bedok once completed in 2024 – to the two towns.

However, the LTA is studying the feasibility of extending the CRL to serve Punggol, he added.

The first phase of the line, which was announced last month, will have two stations in Pasir Ris estate, one that will be an interchange station with the East-West Line and another at Pasir Ris East.

When the CRL was first announced in 2013, plans unveiled then had included a possible link between Punggol and Pasir Ris.

Connecting the two towns by MRT would cut travelling time – currently about 40 minutes by bus – to about 10 to 15 minutes, said the LTA back then.

But the first phase of the CRL, which will stretch across 12 stations from Changi to Sin Ming and be ready by 2029, did not include the possible link to Punggol.

The CRL, Singapore's eighth MRT line, will connect Changi to Jurong once fully completed.

It is projected to have an initial daily ridership of 600,000, which is expected to eventually grow to one million.

Two possible alignments for another stretch of the CRL are also being studied. Nature groups have raised concerns about one alignment that would see the line running under the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.

Mr Gan had also asked Mr Khaw whether the TEL could start service ahead of schedule.

In response, Mr Khaw said the timelines for rail lines are carefully planned so safety is not compromised. "It is unlikely that we can expedite the opening of the TEL further."

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Product and brand names on cigarette packaging will be allowed in a standardised font style and colour when the new rules take effect. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

Cigarettes to be sold in standard plain packaging

Changes to law mean packaging cannot have logos, colours, images, other promotional info

Rei Kurohi

Cigarette packs sold here will have standardised plain packaging with bigger health warnings.

With new rules passed in Parliament yesterday, logos, colours, images or other promotional information associated with the tobacco brand will also not be allowed to be shown on cigarette packaging.

As for product and brand names, they will be allowed in a standardised font style and colour.

The minimum size of graphic health warnings depicting the ill effects of smoking like gum disease will also be increased to 75 per cent of the packaging surface, up from 50 per cent.

The changes – under the Tobacco (Control of Advertisements and Sale) (Amendment) Bill – aim to discourage non-smokers from picking up the habit, urge existing smokers to quit and encourage Singaporeans to adopt a tobacco-free lifestyle, said Senior Minister of State for Health Edwin Tong.

He said: "Cigarette packs serve as a 'five-second commercial' whenever the pack is drawn from the shelf or one's pocket, held in the palm of a hand or placed in full view on the table.

"Evidence suggests that the appeal of branded packaging also acts as one of the factors encouraging children and young adults to experiment with tobacco and to establish, and thereafter continue, a habit of smoking."

Mr Tong cited the success of anti-smoking measures – including the introduction of standardised packaging – taken in other countries like Australia and France.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) said it will soon announce more details on the new rules, including the specifications of the packaging standards and when they will be introduced.

The Bill also raises the maximum fine for the unlicensed import, distribution, possession and sale of tobacco products from $5,000 to $10,000 for first-time offenders and from $10,000 to $20,000 for repeat offenders.

During the debate, seven MPs sought clarifications on the new requirements and raised concerns about their potential negative effects.

Dr Chia Shi Lu (Tanjong Pagar GRC) asked if standardised packaging would lead to consumers choosing cheaper tobacco products due to lower product differentiation, thus leading to an overall increase in smoking rates – a phenomenon known as "down-trading".

He also wanted to know if the latest measures could prompt an increase in counterfeit products.

Mr Tong said down-trading was observed in Australia even before standardised packaging was introduced. The impact of standardised packaging is likely to be modest, he said, adding that policies to make low-price brands less affordable, like raising taxes, can be introduced.

Mr Tong also said most illicit tobacco products in Singapore are genuine but duty-unpaid cigarettes, not counterfeits.

He added that there is no evidence that buyers on the black market will choose counterfeits in standardised packaging over genuine contraband cigarettes.

Mr Louis Ng (Nee Soon GRC) asked how the requirements would be enforced and suggested that MOH introduce a separate agency for the task, similar to Australia's Tobacco Plain Packaging Enforcement Committee.

Mr Tong said the enforcement of tobacco control laws falls under the Health Sciences Authority and is done at the importer, manufacturer and distributor levels. He added that the existing regulatory regime is adequate.

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75%

The space on the packaging surface that graphic health warnings must cover, up from 50 per cent.

Knowledge upgrading to be compulsory for TCM practitioners

The change to the Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Act brings TCM practitioners in line with other healthcare professionals such as doctors, nurses and pharmacists, who must continually upgrade. ST PHOTO: BENJAMIN SEETOR

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioners may not have their practising certificates renewed if they do not meet the new compulsory continuing professional education (CPE) requirements passed in Parliament yesterday.

The change to the Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Act brings TCM practitioners in line with other healthcare professionals like doctors, nurses and pharmacists, who must continually upgrade.

Since 2013, TCM practitioners have been encouraged to participate in a voluntary CPE programme and accumulate at least 25 points a year through approved conferences, seminars, workshops and training courses. Points can also be earned by publishing research papers in recognised journals or books on TCM.

The new Bill will require practitioners to accumulate at least 50 points within a two-year period to renew their certifications.

This will allow them some flexibility to plan their learning without unduly affecting their professional practice, said Senior Minister of State for Health Amy Khor.

The TCM Practitioners Board's disciplinary and investigative powers for dealing with complaints against practitioners have also been strengthened under the Bill.

The existing disciplinary framework does not adequately deal with allegations that a registered TCM practitioner is unfit to practise because of a physical or mental condition, said Dr Khor.

Under the Bill, the board may issue an interim order requiring a practitioner to stop practising for up to 18 months without prior investigations, provided it has reasonable grounds to believe that not issuing such an order would pose a serious risk to the public. In such a situation, the board will also have the power to cancel the practitioner's registration immediately.

The maximum fine that can be imposed on TCM practitioners found guilty of professional misconduct or negligence has also been sharply raised from $10,000 to $50,000.

This is on a par with the $50,000 maximum fine that can be imposed on dental, pharmaceutical and allied health professionals.

Dr Khor said the board receives, on average, fewer than 10 complaints about TCM practitioners each year, with about half requiring disciplinary action.

Investigators appointed by the board will now also be able to enter and search a place used or suspected to be used for TCM practice without a court warrant.

They will also be able to seize evidence such as documents, records and other items for the purpose of investigating offences under the Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Act.

Rei Kurohi

Jail for couple who abused maid

Linda Seah Lei Sie and Lim Toon Leng abused their maid between August and October 2016. ST PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW

Shaffiq Alkhatib

A beauty salon manager tormented her maid for months, forcing her to perform multiple acts of self-harm, including pouring hot water on herself and drinking dirty water mixed with detergent.

Linda Seah Lei Sie, 39, was sentenced to three years' jail yesterday after District Judge Olivia Low found her guilty of abusing Ms Phyu Phyu Mar following a 15-day trial.

The manager of Anew Me Beauty Aesthetic salon at The Centrepoint shopping mall in Orchard Road was also ordered to pay $11,800 in compensation to the maid.

Judge Low said: "Linda's unhappiness with the victim's work should not justify any form of violence against the victim... Up till now, she still has a scar on her left shoulder and she would have to always wear a jacket to cover it up."

The judge had on Jan 18 found Seah guilty of five assault charges and one count of causing the maid to drink the tainted water.

Seah's husband, interior designer Lim Toon Leng, 44, was sentenced to six weeks' jail after he was convicted of an assault charge. He was ordered to pay $500 compensation.

The Singaporean couple, who have a five-year-old daughter, committed the offences in their Punggol Walk flat between August and October 2016.

The court heard that Ms Phyu Phyu Mar did not receive her monthly salary of $700 throughout her employment with her abusers. Her weight also plummeted from 50kg to 38kg because of a lack of food.

Deputy Public Prosecutors Sarah Shi and Jotham Tay said in their submissions that Seah employed Ms Phyu Phyu Mar from February to October 2016.

The DPPs added that the maid received her full salary only in November that year when the Ministry of Manpower intervened.

The maid testified during the trial that Seah made her pour hot water on herself on two occasions – in August and September 2016 – because Seah was unhappy with her.

The maid suffered scald marks and blisters on her skin when she complied.

Instead of taking her to a doctor, Seah gave her a needle and told her to puncture the blisters herself.

Besides these incidents, Seah also ordered the maid to drink tainted water, made her hit her head against the floor, grabbed the Myanmar national's hair and used a mobile phone to repeatedly hit her.

On Oct 13, 2016, Lim punched Ms Phyu Phyu Mar's forehead twice after he wrongly assumed that she had thrown away his spectacles.

The court heard that the domestic worker used to accompany Seah to her salon a few times a week. It was one of the salon's employees who alerted the police to the maid's plight.

Seah intends to appeal against her conviction, sentence and compensation. Her bail has been set at $15,000. Lim will be appealing against conviction and sentence. His bail is $5,000.

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3 years

Beauty salon manager Linda Seah Lei Sie's jail sentence. She was also ordered to pay $11,800 in compensation to her former maid.

6 weeks

Interior designer Lim Toon Leng's jail sentence. He must also pay his former maid $500 in compensation.

NO JUSTIFICATION FOR VIOLENCE

Linda's unhappiness with the victim's work should not justify any form of violence against the victim... Up till now, she still has a scar on her left shoulder and she would have to always wear a jacket to cover it up.

DISTRICT JUDGE OLIVIA LOW

Long-service award for 19 pairs of maids, employers

Filipina honoured as longest-serving maid, having worked for same family for 28 years

Shabana Begum

When Ms Maria Aida Procalla Somejo left her hometown in the Philippines in 1990 to become a foreign domestic worker in Singapore, she did not expect to end up with four "daughters" and spend almost half her life with another family.

Ms Somejo, 59, who is single, has been working for the Choo family for 28 years. She raised three of the children from birth but is most attached to the youngest, said her employer's eldest daughter, Ms Choo Yuen Ling.

"Ever since my youngest sister started speaking, instead of calling her 'Auntie' like all of us do, she chose to call her 'Mama'. When we tried to correct her, she wouldn't listen," said the 30-year-old business development manager.

Yesterday, Ms Somejo and Ms Choo were one of 19 pairs of foreign domestic workers and employers who received the Long Service Award at the Holiday Inn Singapore Atrium. Ms Choo collected the award on behalf of her parents.

The annual ceremony organised by the Association of Employment Agencies (Singapore) honours foreign domestic workers who have worked in the same household for at least 10 years. Ms Somejo was the longest-serving award recipient.

Above: Ms Naw Wah Wah from Myanmar has worked with the same employer for 11 years. She says she will continue to look after her 94-year-old employer until either one of them dies.

Left: Ms Choo Yuen Ling with Ms Maria Aida Procalla Somejo, who has worked with the Choo family for 28 years. Ms Somejo, who is from the Philippines, received the longest-serving award yesterday. Ms Choo is the eldest of four children. ST PHOTOS: KELVIN CHNG

SCAN TO WATCH
Foreign domestic workers lauded for long service.
http://str.sg/fdws

The Manpower Ministry says that one in two foreign domestic workers currently remain with the same employer for more than a year.

Ms Somejo mastered cooking of Chinese dishes within her first few months at work, even whipping up items like dumplings, roast pork and lotus root soup.

"During Chinese New Year, she would cook lotus root soup, a special request from our extended relatives. They visit once a year but they also know 'Auntie' because of her cooking and because she's been with us for so long," said Ms Choo.

When Typhoon Haiyan left Ms Somejo's relatives homeless in 2013, Ms Choo's mother and her third sister donated $1,300 so that they could rebuild their home.

The other domestic worker recipients were eight Indonesians, four Sri Lankans, an Indian national and two other Filipinas. For the first time, three from Myanmar also received the long-service award. One of them, Ms Naw Wah Wah, 44, has been taking care of Madam Yap Guat Eng, 94, for 11 years.

Ms Naw struggled with English at first, but Madam Yap – a former English teacher – would patiently correct her grammar and pronunciation. Said Ms Naw: "My parents are gone and I'm not married. I promised my employer: 'Until you go or I go, I will continue to look after you.' She was so happy."

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Seven weeks' jail for NS defaulter

Zaley Cheng Xi Xiong "heard stories about NS" and feared "sustaining injuries".

Shaffiq Alkhatib

A youth with medical issues was so afraid of sustaining injuries during national service (NS) training that he fled Singapore in 2014.

Singaporean Zaley Cheng Xi Xiong later obtained his bachelor's degree in Australia and returned to Singapore only on Aug 30, 2017. Court documents did not give details of his medical issues.

Cheng, 25, was jailed for seven weeks yesterday after pleading guilty to remaining outside Singapore without a valid exit permit for more than three years – from May 2014 to August 2017.

A separate charge of failing to report for full-time NS enlistment was considered during sentencing.

The court heard that a notice was mailed to Cheng's Singapore home on April 7, 2014, and he was supposed to report at the Basic Military Training Centre in June that year. When he failed to turn up, an enlistment inspector went to his apartment on June 12, 2014, but realised that no one was home. The inspector slipped a notice under the front door, asking Cheng to report to the Central Manpower Base the next day.

A police gazette was issued on June 16, 2014, for Cheng's arrest when he failed to turn up for the second time, and travel records showed that he had left Singapore in May that year.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Kwang Jia Min said: "He heard stories about national service and was afraid of sustaining injuries during national service training. As such, the accused decided to leave Singapore so as to evade national service.

"The accused's parents did not know about his initial intention to evade national service as he lied to them by informing (them) that he was going to Brunei for a holiday."

But when Cheng got to Brunei, he confessed to his parents about his intention to evade NS and that he wanted to remain in Australia for good. He went to Australia soon after. His mother tried to persuade him to return to Singapore but he was reluctant to serve NS at that point of time, the court heard.

After obtaining his degree, he decided to return to Singapore in 2017 as his father had been diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Cheng is now serving his NS with the Singapore Armed Forces, having enlisted on Jan 26 last year.

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TAFEP
Tripartite Alliance for Fair & Progressive Employment Practices

"Staggered Time has enabled us to better manage our busy academic schedules, and still have quality time with our children."

Zachery Rajendran
Senior Lecturer and father of a newborn and a child aged 3 yrs old
Republic Polytechnic

Faith Ng
Lecturer and mother of 3 children aged 2 to 7 yrs old
Republic Polytechnic

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Learn more about Work-Life Strategy and its business benefits at **worklifeworks.sg**.

*Source: Republic Polytechnic's Office of Human Resources

Pilot, stewardess grounded over SIA cockpit incident

Captain had let her sit on first officer's chair during Jan 12 flight, and took photo for her

Karamjit Kaur
Senior Aviation Correspondent

A Singapore Airlines (SIA) captain has been grounded since Feb 1 after he allowed a stewardess to sit on the first officer's chair and took a photo for her.

The cabin crew member has also been grounded, The Straits Times found out.

When questioned, the pilot said the stewardess was on the chair to help clean some stains on the cockpit window.

Confirming the incident, SIA said it happened on Jan 12 during Flight SQ207 to Melbourne. At the time, the stewardess was in the cockpit to clear the in-flight meal trays.

Said the airline's spokesman: "The cabin crew (member) sat on the first officer's seat in order to reach the stains (on the cockpit window). Subsequently, she requested a photo of herself in the seat, to which the captain obliged."

SIA emphasised that there was no breach of security within the cockpit. Still, in accordance with the airline's standard procedures, the captain and stewardess have been grounded "while we look into the matter", said its spokesman.

It is not clear how long the two will be off flying duties.

Commercial pilots and cabin crew The Straits Times spoke to said that, as a general rule, cabin crew members do not occupy the pilots' seats, for safety reasons.

Said a cabin crew member who declined to be named: "It's not about security but safety. The cockpit is full of controls, levers and buttons so we are always very mindful and careful when we step inside.

"Even when serving the pilots their meals, we are careful to serve from the outside. So for the captain who sits on the left, we serve from his left and for the first officer, it's from the right. We never stand in front of the controls."

Typically, each cockpit has four seats – two in front for the captain and first officer, and two observer seats behind them.

These seats are reserved for a third or fourth pilot on long flights, and can also be occupied for take-off and landing by technical observers authorised by the airline or representatives from regulatory bodies.

In some situations, newly trained cabin crew members are allowed to sit in the observer seats, so that they get a better understanding of the critical phases of flight.

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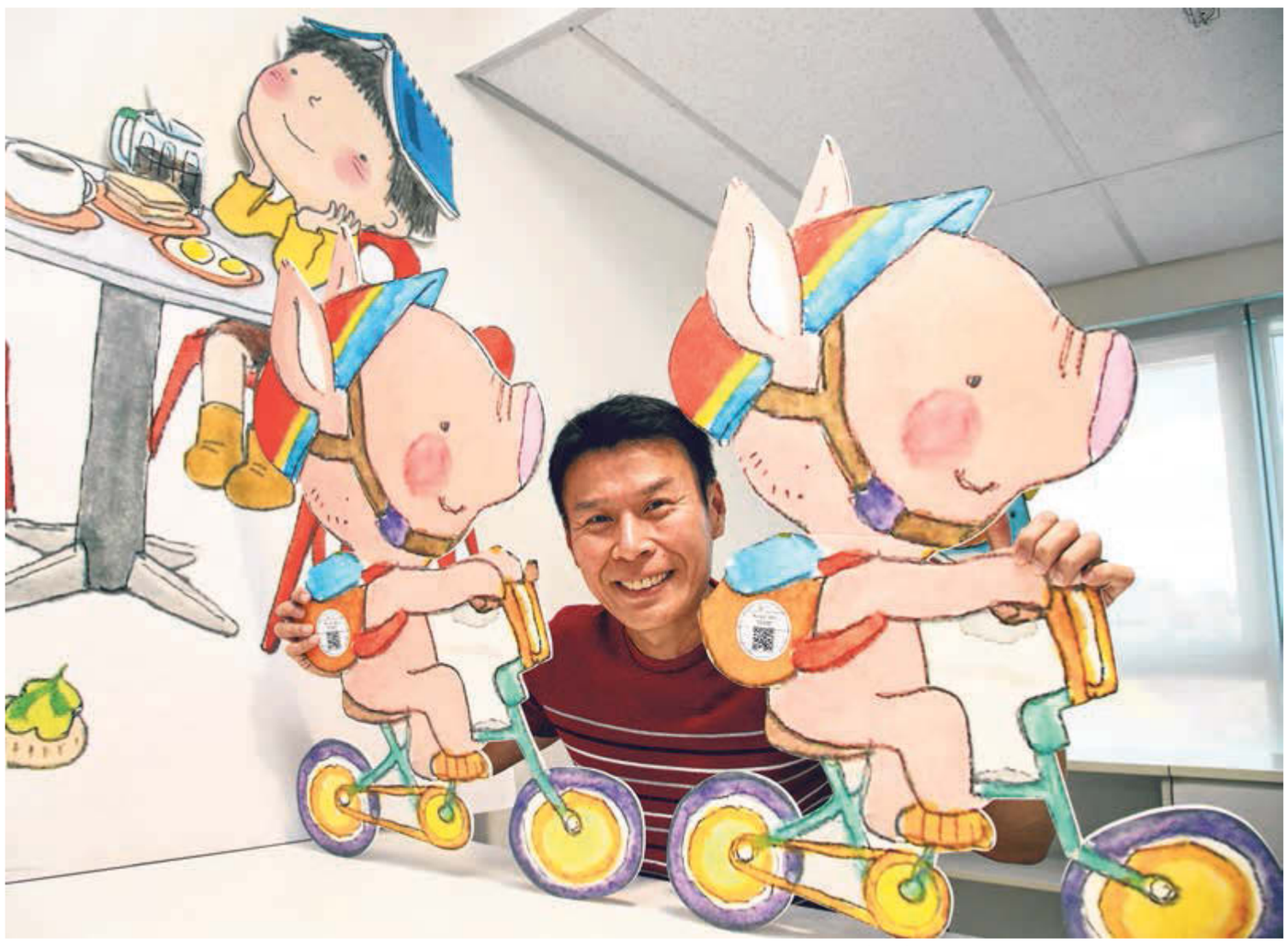
Illustrator is first artist in residence at SPH unit

Vanessa Liu



Illustrator Lee Kow Fong has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese Media Group (CMG) of Singapore Press Holdings for a two-year collaboration. Under the deal, he will be the first artist in residence at CMG and have his own studio at the group's office. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

In this digital age, where anyone can be an amateur artist with the help of painting and drawing apps designed for smartphones and iPads, local illustrator Lee Kow Fong remains steadfast in creating his watercolour works by hand.

The children's picture book writer, who goes by the pseudonym Ah Guo, told The Straits Times in Mandarin: "I like using watercolour because it's fluid and versatile, unlike oil and acrylic. It can be transparent or opaque, depending on the techniques you use. It gives people a 'flowy' feeling, which I feel is similar to my personality – light, not heavy. When you work on canvas or paper, there's no way to undo or reset anything. Whatever you put down on the canvas or paper is just as it is."

Mr Lee, 48, has written and illustrated close to 20 picture books, including The Search, which won Best Children's Title at the Singapore Books Award in 2016.

His official Facebook page – Ah Guo Illustration – has almost 12,000 followers to date.

Yesterday, he signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Chinese Media Group (CMG) of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) for a two-year collaboration.

Under the MOU, he will be the first artist in residence at CMG and have his own studio at the group's office.

CMG will also help to promote his works and provide a venue for his activities whenever possible.

For his part, Mr Lee will create a large watercolour painting for SPH and partner CMG on various projects, including conducting sharing sessions with its artists.

Mr Lee previously worked with CMG for the Singapore Book Fair in 2017, where his works were used as the overall design theme of the event.

CMG managing editor Loh Woon Yen said: "This is part of CMG's efforts to support and promote talented Singapore artists and artisans beyond our media platforms. By providing a studio space for Singapore artists in our latest initiative, we wish to work more closely with local artists to develop works of art, designs and products that are infused with our unique Singapore culture."

UNIQUE SINGAPORE CULTURE

By providing a studio space for Singapore artists in our latest initiative, we wish to work more closely with local artists to develop art works, designs and products that are infused with our unique Singapore culture.

MS LOH WOON YEN, managing editor of SPH's Chinese Media Group.

Mr Lee took art as an O-level subject but lost touch with it subsequently. He was a Chinese copywriter for commercial radio and then a polytechnic lecturer teaching modules on Chinese media and communications – two jobs, he said, that had nothing to do with art. He rediscovered his passion for art when he started blogging in the 2000s and would include simple illustrations in his writing. He went on to do illustrations regularly, putting them on Facebook and Instagram.

In 2009, he decided to combine his penchant for storytelling with his passion for illustration by pursuing a master's degree in children's book illustration in Britain. This marked his foray into illustrating books. "Most of my characters are children and animals. I hope to capture a sense of happiness – a little dreamy, a little whimsical and at the same time, there is a sense of hope. I hope that viewers will feel happy and hopeful when looking at my illustrations," Mr Lee said.

He added that he hoped to be able to make use of his new space at CMG to do larger works on canvas, including acrylic and watercolour paintings.

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Budget speech to start at 3.30pm on Feb 18

Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat will deliver the Budget 2019 statement in Parliament from 3.30pm next Monday.

The Ministry of Finance (MOF) and government feedback unit Reach said in a joint statement yesterday that a live webcast of the Budget speech will be available on the Singapore Budget website.

The MOF is also partnering the Singapore Association for the Deaf to provide simultaneous sign language interpretation of the Budget speech on the site.

There will be real-time updates of key announcements from the Budget speech on the MOF's Facebook page and Twitter account.

The Budget speech will be broadcast live on Channel NewsAsia and 938NOW, on the Channel NewsAsia website and on Mediacorp's Toggle interactive service.

The public may visit the Singapore Budget website and subscribe to receive the full Budget statement via e-mail after it has been delivered. This service will be available for sign-ups until noon on Friday.

Updates on the Budget will also be available via the MOF's WhatsApp and Telegram channels. The public can get details on how to sign up for these services on the Singapore Budget website.

Following the delivery of the Budget 2019 statement, the public can submit their views on the Budget through various feedback channels.

These channels are:

- the Singapore Budget website
- Reach's Budget microsite
- Reach Singapore's Facebook and Twitter (@REACH_Singapore)
- Reach's e-mail address at reach@reach.gov.sg
- Reach's toll-free hotline on 1800-353-5555 from 8.30am to 5.45pm on weekdays, and also via SMS on 9-SPEAK-UP (9-77325-87).

In addition, Reach will be conducting a series of radio talk shows and dialogues to discuss the Budget 2019 measures. These will take place from Feb 19 to 23.

Those interested in attending the dialogues may register at Reach's Budget 2019 microsite or e-mail reach@reach.gov.sg.

The public can also provide their feedback at Reach Listening Points, which are booths for Singaporeans to give their views in person. These booths are open for three hours at each location between Feb 20 and March 3.

This initiative will kick off at the Singapore University of Technology and Design canteen and the National University of Singapore School of Business from 11.30am to 2.30pm on Feb 20.

ST BUDGET COVERAGE

- Get real-time updates and watch live streaming on straitstimes.com on Feb 18.
- Receive a special-edition Budget newsletter. To get the newsletter, sign up for ST Evening Update at http://str.sg/newsletters
- For more stories, visit the Budget microsite at str.sg/budget2019

Fire breaks out at Telok Blangah hawker centre

An overheated wok caused a fire to break out at a hawker centre in Telok Blangah yesterday morning.

At least 12 stalls were affected after the gas supply was cut as a result, Chinese-language paper Shin Min Daily News reported.

The Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) said it responded to the fire at 11 Telok Blangah Crescent at 9.08am.

The fire involved a wok in a hawker stall, the SCDF said. No injuries were reported.

The first firefighter at the scene observed flames coming from a partially covered wok and tried to extinguish it with water.

However, the flames grew bigger, leading the firefighter to use a dry powder fire extinguisher and a compressed air foam backpack to put out the fire. He was subsequently assisted by arriving SCDF officers.

The SCDF said the fire also affected a kitchen exhaust duct at the hawker centre.

Shin Min reported that the fire started at a hawker stall which sells fried fish cakes.

The stall owner, Mr Zhang Chuanrong, 35, told Shin Min that he was cleaning up his stall and preparing for the next day's business when the fire started. He had been heating oil when it overheated and the stove did not turn off automatically. Instead, sparks appeared, he said. The fire grew larger and spread to the exhaust duct above his stall.

His stall had been closed for the past few days and there were not a lot of ingredients on the premises, he added, saying that his estimated losses from the fire were not major.

The owner of a fishball noodle stall nearby said the gas supply for her unit was cut off.

A video of firefighters putting out the fire was posted on social media, showing SCDF officers asking passers-by to keep away from the scene.

The SCDF said preliminary investigation revealed that the fire was due to overheating.

Choo Yun Ting

Lizard in snack was from facility that shut in Nov

AVA concludes probe into Irvins Salted Egg which has moved to new factory; no action to be taken

Ng Huiwen

The packet of salted egg fish skin snack that contained a dead lizard was manufactured at Irvins Salted Egg's previous premises which ceased operations in November last year, the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) said.

That facility is understood to be located in Admiralty Street.

AVA said in a statement yesterday that it had completed investigations into the Singapore-based food company after a customer in Bangkok found a dead lizard in a packet of the popular snack in December last year.

It added that it has since inspected Irvins' current premises and told the company to improve its quality control checks. Such checks include conducting regular refresher training for quality control operators, sourcing for ingredients from reputable suppliers and conducting regular audits.

"Irvins has made improvements in these areas, as well as stepped up inspections on the production line," AVA said. The authority added that it will continue to conduct periodic audits and enforcement checks on the firm.

The Straits Times understands that no further action will be taken against the company, whose new production facility is at JTC Food Hub in Senoko Drive.

Irvins Salted Egg, which has at least 13 outlets in Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines, manufactures all its products in Singapore. Locals and tourists often stand in line to snap up its snacks.

In a Facebook post on Dec 29 last year, Bangkok resident Jane Holloway, 38, said her mother and brother had finished half a bag of Irvins Salted Egg Fish Skin before they discovered the dead gecko.

She told ST she had bought the snack in early November from international supermarket Villa Market at K Village in the Khlong Toei district. Her Facebook post went viral, with netizens urging the Singapore authorities to take action.

In a statement on Jan 2, Irvins Salted Egg founder Irvin Gunawan said customers who bought salted egg snacks expiring on Oct 16 this year or who were uncomfortable eating them could ask for a refund.

AVA urged food manufacturers to be responsible in complying with food safety standards or requirements as well as maintaining robust food safety management systems. It will continue to carry out periodic checks.

Consumers should also adhere to good food safety practices, it added. Some good food safety guidelines for consumers include:

- Examining packaged food carefully. Do not buy if the package is damaged or open as it may contain harmful micro-organisms that could cause food poisoning.
- Keeping foodstuff such as tea, coffee, powdered milk and biscuits in clean, airtight containers, away from heat and moisture.
- Inspecting food regularly for insect infestation, mould, and other signs of spoilage. Discard when necessary.
- Checking storage cupboards regularly to ensure they are free from insect infestation or contamination.
- Keeping storage cupboards uncluttered and clean.

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13 people commended for rejecting bribes

From left: CPG Facilities Management liaison officer Mohammed Adrian Hussein, 39, Sergeant Muhammad Sufi Mohd Hussin, 26, Sergeant Sally Chua, 27, and Sergeant Mervyn Pea, 24, were among those commended by CPIB yesterday for rejecting bribes. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Charmaine Ng

He was drunk, drove his van up a kerb, and when approached by police officers, attempted to bribe them with $50.

But Sergeant Muhammad Sufi Mohd Hussin and Sergeant Sally Chua rejected the money and instructed 46-year-old delivery driver Tock Chan Kok to step out of the van.

Recalling the October 2016 incident, Sgt Chua said: "When I asked what his intention was, he kept quiet and later said he mistook the $50 note for his IC. However, it was clear to us that he was aware of what he was doing."

The officers, who were on foot patrol in Bukit Panjang, then informed their team leader about the attempted bribery, and the case was referred to the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB). Tock was later jailed for three weeks and fined $2,100 for attempting to bribe two policemen and for offences under the Road Traffic Act.

Sgt Muhammad Sufi, 26, and Sgt Chua, 27, were among 13 individuals who were commended by CPIB yesterday for rejecting bribes.

Apart from police officers, individuals from the private sector were also commended, such as Mr Mohammed Adrian Hussein, 39.

The liaison officer at CPG Facilities Management was conducting a spot check at an overcrowded Housing Board shophouse in Jurong East in 2017 when he was offered $200 by a tenant, who asked him to be lenient in his inspection report.

Mr Adrian rejected the bribe and the incident was reported to CPIB.

The tenant was jailed three weeks for attempting to bribe Mr Adrian.

Director of CPIB, Mr Denis Tang, commended the 13 individuals for being fine examples of honesty and righteousness, and encouraged the public to reject and report acts of corruption if they come across any.

He noted that Singapore was ranked the third least corrupt country out of 180 countries in the 2018 edition of the Corruption Perceptions Index, and continues to have a low incidence of corruption.

However, he added that Singapore "cannot afford to be complacent".

"We must recognise that if we ever allow corruption to creep back, it will come with tremendous negative repercussions and costs to Singapore's economic development and social mobility."

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What does it mean to say we need "much more than academic abilities"? What non-academic factors does Singapore need to pay more attention to? How do we approach the issues and effect changes with meaningful impact?

What is the relationship between education, work and various notions of success?

How are academic and non-academic factors related to civil society and politics in Singapore?

By exploring these and other issues in Singapore, this conference will provide new perspectives and possibilities on how we look at academic abilities and non-academic attributes, as we aspire to live a better life, make a positive difference to others, and build a stronger Singapore society.

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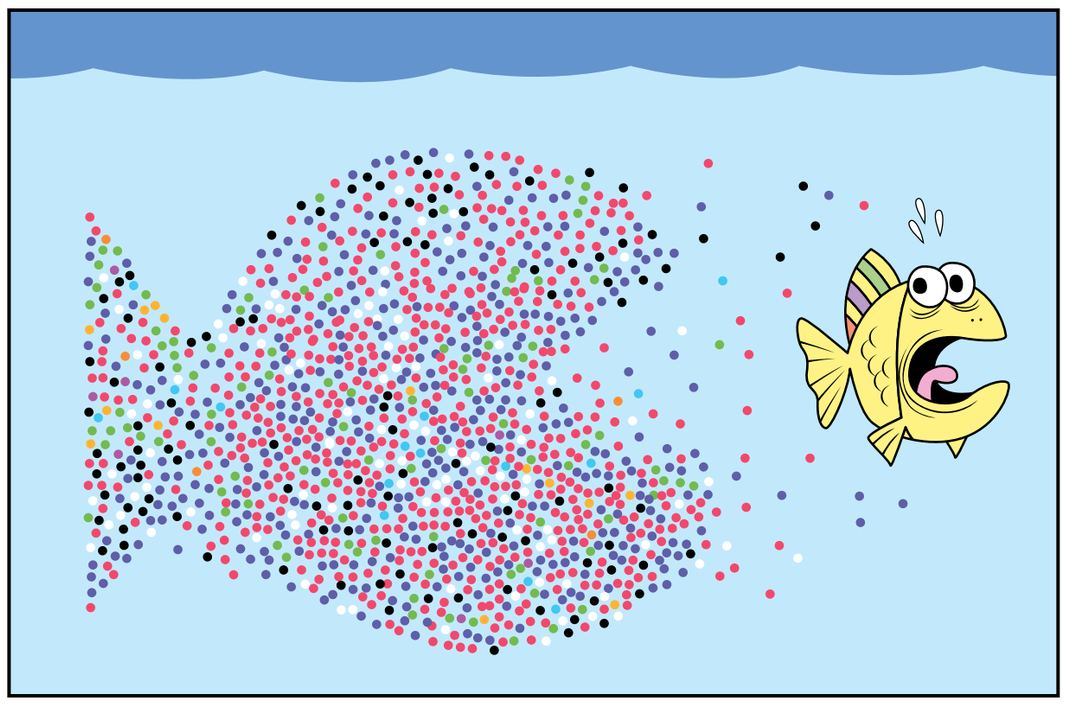
FORUM

Miel's TAKE

Toxic bacteria found on microplastics around Singapore's coastline



Mistakes can be helpful for Singapore

I agree with Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat that we should look at things in the right perspective and not bay for blood at the first sign of trouble (Leaders will do what it takes to put things right: Heng; Feb 9).

One misconception is that there has been an increase in problems and failures today compared with the past.

However, as someone who has witnessed how Singapore has transformed from Third World to First, I must say that mistakes and failures tend to become public almost instantaneously today and, at times, they are amplified, compared with in the 60s or 70s.

Social media today allows everyone to jump into the debate with impunity, and people are able to voice unhappiness, whims and fancies quickly, and to a large audience.

We have always been a nation of risk-takers, since the time of our founding fathers. Innovations and creativity require us to embrace failure as an inevitable part of our DNA in order to progress further.

I think what is important is for us to learn from mistakes and make further improvements.

Our founding fathers understood and embraced it, and we should do the same. We should view mistakes and failures positively – not as stumbling blocks, but as stepping stones to greater breakthroughs and new peaks in our development.

Seah Yam Meng

Address perception of people as well

Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat's comments were a clear defence of the Government's performance to date (Singapore Govt has not gone slack, and Leaders will do what it takes to put things right: Heng; both published on Feb 9).

It is not what you say but how you say it that matters.

Despite Mr Heng's explanation, he did not address the critical issue of public perception and did not take heed of the critical adage that "justice must not only be served but must also be seen to be served".

Perhaps Mr Heng can do more to explain and make Singaporeans understand the issues facing Singapore in a way that would help him become a strong leader for the country.

Thomas Lee Hock Seng (Dr)

FORUM ONLINE

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Grades and conformity not the only recipe for success

I read with disbelief and dismay the assertion by Ms Low Siew Hua that grades in school are an excellent barometer for other "desirable qualities" (Grades an important gauge for other qualities; Feb 9).

The respect for authority and teachers that she champions is believed by some to be a euphemism for the behaviour of students who are completely subservient.

Such students have it deeply ingrained in them to accept the norm without any critical thinking because, to their mind, higher-ups are infallible.

These students could be the perfect blueprint for a society of book-smart drones with personality and EQ deficits.

The obsession with deifying and according reverence to authority figures does nothing but stymie out-of-the-box thinking and problem-solving skills – attributes that are critical in an increasingly competitive regional and global economy.

I also disagree that students who are inattentive or not prompt in assignment submissions cannot be expected to attain stellar grades.

Such a view does a great disservice to children who are bogged down with very heavy workloads, extra curricular activities and family issues, which could keep them up at night.

All over the world, many of the most successful people have not been what we would call model students.

We bemoan the lack of entrepreneurs and innovators, but it is time we did some introspection and shed ourselves of this mindset that values grades, respect and blind conformity above all else.

Only then will the creative thinkers have an avenue to flourish.

Bradley Christopher Boon

WRITE IN: Letters should be meant for exclusive publication in The Straits Times. They should be no longer than 400 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone numbers. The Forum editor reserves the right to edit the letters. For women, please indicate Miss, Ms, Mrs or Madam. Please e-mail your letter to stforum@sph.com.sg. Readers can also respond to letters via Facebook and Twitter.

Doctors need patient data to prepare for treatment

I refer to the report by senior health correspondent Salma Khalik (MOH must learn from breaches to build more robust, secure system; Feb 1) and the Forum letter by Ms Susan Tan (Rethink idea of centralised health record system; Feb 9).

Both suggest doctors should access patient records only when patients are present.

Both are written without an understanding of how healthcare professionals work.

Doctors don't just access patients' medical records when they are sitting before us.

Most of us prepare for clinic by going through our patient lists, clicking through each patient's record and carefully reviewing notes to catch up on events that may have happened since we last saw them, so that our clinic operations can flow smoothly.

In public-sector hospitals where clinic lists are packed, not doing so would decrease capacity and increase wait time.

Similarly, for patients in the ward, junior and senior doctors spend the time before rounds going through the list of patients under their care, reviewing blood test results and clinical charts.

Not doing so may risk doctors missing information, as rounds often require the need to cover more than 20 patients with complex medical conditions.

Most importantly, this allows doctors to use the patient-contact time to engage them, instead of looking at a computer screen.

Add to that the need for medical reports, consults from other doctors for a specialist opinion, audits of care and morbidity reviews to systematically improve care – all of these require access to patient data when the patient is not present with the common aim of delivering excellent medical care.

The other issue is of health literacy in Singapore.

Sadly, as many doctors in the public healthcare sector will attest to, this is currently less than optimal.

As doctors, we constantly advocate patient empowerment, and would be delighted to work with patients to deliver the best care.

I totally agree that we need to secure our systems to prevent data breaches in future but, to quote Ms Khalik herself, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

In our eagerness to protect patient data, let's not forget to protect the patients themselves.

Manjari Lahiri (Dr)

In our eagerness to protect patient data, let's not forget to protect the patients themselves.

OnFacebook

Should there be an NS football team comprising NSFs in the Singapore Premier League?

Full-time national servicemen have a lot of training to undergo. I do not support burdening them with more as it may be done at the expense of personal safety and psychological well-being.

Besides, we need to be clear about what we want to achieve out of such a transitional football team. After completion of national service, the chances are not high that they will be able to commit to playing football professionally.

Soon Joo Kuo

They will not perform at their best given the limited time to train while serving the nation.

If they are real gems, two years of not playing professional football would not hurt.

Roy Low

Professional football has its age limits. You are done when you reach mid-30s. Thus, two years is a lot of time.

HerMan GonMez

Not a bad idea, let's give it a try!

Peng T Tay

Should there be greater urgency and focus in supporting innovation in the fight against plastic waste?

Finding an innovative solution in the fight against plastic may incur significant research and development costs, to the extent of it becoming a bottomless pit.

An organisation runs the risk of using up its funds without achieving any solution or making any good progress.

Should we support innovation in the fight against plastic waste? In terms of environmental and humanitarian reasons, definitely yes.

But which country or organisation is willing to pump in funds and resources with the prospect of it happening indefinitely, for the noble cause of saving mankind and Mother Earth?

Kok Siong

Yes, definitely, and there must be sufficient funding to support the innovation drive.

Otherwise the fight against plastic waste will always be a work in progress and the environment, the casualty.

Harry Chia

Bring back Safsa to boost local football

Converting the Young Lions into a professional national service football team will not be contrary to the national policy in Singapore mandated by law, which requires all male Singaporeans to serve a period of two years of compulsory service in the Singapore Armed Forces (Convert Young Lions to NS Team, by Mr Ivan Goh; Feb 4).

NS was first instituted to help build Singapore's military forces to be operationally ready in times of conflict and has since been expanded to involve the Singapore Police Force and Singapore Civil Defence Force.

However, the armed forces could contribute to the national football cause by using NS to help develop players for the national teams and providing recreational training programmes and competitions among its various units and divisions.

This way, potential players for national squads could still continue to participate in these competitions to hone their skills rather than be stuck in a football limbo for two years while serving NS.

In the past, the armed forces entered a football team called Safsa in the National Football League, and it achieved many honours.

It was a formidable side and produced many talented players for the national team.

George Pasqual

Inspection of 3-year-old cars ensures safety

We thank Mr Koh Bock Swi for his letter (Check for 3-year-old cars a waste of money; Jan 30).

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) requires regular vehicle inspections to ensure that vehicles meet the necessary safety and emission standards for road usage.

Vehicle components such as brakes, wheels, brake pads and lights are subject to significant wear and tear during the first three years, and the mandatory vehicle inspections can pick up issues with these components to ensure the safety of all road users.

In fact, an average of about 4.6 per cent of three-year-old cars, or more than 1,500 cars, have failed their first inspections in the past five years.

Singapore's vehicle inspection requirements are similar to those of countries such as Germany and Japan, which require cars to be inspected once they reach three years of age.

LTA will continue to regularly review its vehicle inspection requirements to take into account technological developments and international practices.

Alvin Chia
Group Director, Vehicle Services
Land Transport Authority

Let CPIB do its job in red packet practice probe

The Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) has done excellent work over the years and its experience and achievements have made Singapore one of the least corrupt countries in the world for decades.

It makes good sense for it to investigate anyone who violates anti-corruption laws.

Cultural practices, even if based on superstition or feelings of compassion or gratitude, are not good reasons to stop the CPIB from carrying out an investigation (Giving red packets: Each case assessed on its merits; Feb 11).

The more important allegation is that some of the funeral service providers or their personnel collect the red packets from grieving families to give to crematorium workers. If so, it is good the CPIB is looking into the allegations.

Let us leave the CPIB to do its work and not weaken its resolve.

It is assuring to the public that each case of alleged corruption is assessed on its own merits.

From my experience, no crematorium worker directly approaches bereaved families for red packets. Also, bereaved relatives I know never hand red packets to the workers. The issue seems to be the alleged collection of red packets by intermediaries to be passed on to workers.

Lim Ang Yong

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Ring of light

A halo spotted around the sun in Toa Payoh on Sept 9, 2004. A halo is a coloured or white ring formed when sunlight is reflected by tiny ice crystals in the atmosphere and is not an uncommon phenomenon.

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Azhar Kasman is the Editor of Stomp, SPH's award-winning citizen-journalism site, and also a Content Strategist for SPH's English, Malay, Tamil Media Group. Besides his editorial duties, Azhar explores new digital technologies and innovations for the newsroom and works closely with business clients to help them conceptualise and execute their digital content strategies.

Navjot Pawera is the director and head of design at Buuuk, a Singapore-based tech studio that has helped government and private organisations win international awards with their innovative digital solutions. He had previously worked with clients in India and Norway before working in Singapore.

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BUSINESS

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NUMBER OF UNITS AT FLORENCE RESIDENCES, WHICH WILL BE LAUNCHED SOON C2

Omni Sharing directors Oscar Moises Chaves (left) and his brother Samuel (right), with chief operating officer Carlos Abarca. Omni yesterday applied for a sandbox licence to rent out 500 e-scooters here under the 0mn1 brand. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

oBike's new owner applies for licence to run PMD service

Investor to shut down bike-share firm, start e-scooter sharing under new brand

Toh Ting Wei

oBike's new majority shareholder is aiming to become a global player in the personal mobility device (PMD) scene – but under a different brand.

Founded by a young Costa Rican investor, Omni Sharing yesterday applied for a sandbox licence to rent out 500 e-scooters here under the 0mn1 brand. Mr Oscar Moises Chaves is the head of investment firm OSS Inversiones, which bought oBike last September.

Mr Chaves, over the course of two interviews with The Straits Times in the past month, expressed confidence in solving oBike's problems and also establishing 0mn1.

The 29-year-old said he initially wanted to clear oBike's debts and launch a new range of shared PMDs under the brand, but delays in resolving its liabilities led to a new plan.

"Now we just want to shut down oBike and run 0mn1," he said. "If you don't clean the house first, you can't receive the visits. So we had to build a new house."

Mr Chaves said Omni's tech team is based in Shanghai, and the manufacturer in Shenzhen.

The firm has about 12 employees here, and wants to expand the team to 30 by April. Mr Chaves and his younger brother, Samuel, are directors in Omni.

It will offer seated e-scooters that can be taken onto trains, which differentiates it from its competitors, said Mr Chaves.

"We are giving the best thing we can give to users – safety. The seated scooter lets you react, gives you back your reflexes, gives you back the stability a micro-mobility device needs."

STARTING AFRESH

> **Now we just want to shut down oBike and run 0mn1. If you don't clean the house first, you can't receive the visits. So we had to build a new house.**
>
> **MR OSCAR MOISES CHAVES**, who said he initially wanted to clear oBike's debts and launch a new range of shared PMDs under the brand, but delays in resolving its liabilities led to a new plan.

If its application is approved, Omni will look to deploy its e-scooters around Orchard Road and Raffles Place.

This would be the first step in a plan to expand globally, said Mr Chaves. Omni chose to start in Singapore as it wanted to show potential markets that it can operate in a regulated environment.

The Land Transport Authority has taken a controlled approach with the shared e-scooter industry, with the window to apply to run a small fleet of shared-PMD services here closing yesterday.

Operators have to show that they can deal with indiscriminate parking and comply with rules and maintain healthy utilisation rates, among other requirements, before they can expand their fleet.

Mr Chaves said: "We want to learn these legislation, and once we properly establish the company, we will export the Singaporean way to do this. I have talked with many city mayors and they really support the idea that the right way to run (sharing services) is through legislation."

But while 0mn1 is moving ahead, oBike remains in limbo.

It is currently in liquidation in Singapore after its abrupt exit last June. The liquidators, FTI Consulting, said the firm has chalked up about $9.4 million in liabilities, most of which are user deposits.

Payment for the debts is at an impasse. At a meeting with creditors last month, FTI said it has provided Mr Chaves with information that he has requested.

But Mr Chaves, who holds a 66.87 per cent stake in oBike's global business, said the given information accounted for only about $1.8 million of the firm's debts. He expects to eventually spend "tens of millions" to tie up the loose ends for oBike, which include shutting the business in other countries and paying off remaining shareholders.

Despite the drawn-out process, Mr Chaves said he has no regrets about taking over oBike.

His investment firm OSS proceeded with the deal in September as it wanted to tap oBike's platform, data and connections.

Mr Chaves also wanted to make a name for himself by solving oBike's problems.

"It sounds like I am just wasting my money, but no, we received a very strong and well-developed platform. We received users' database, we received all the new projects that oBike was working on," he said. "Right now, I think it's still a cheap price to pay for a platform of that quality."

Adjunct associate professor Zafar Momin at Nanyang Business School told ST that buying oBike gave OSS a jump-start in its aspirations in shared mobility, but the deal might make less sense if the cost of settling the firm's debts became prohibitive.

"In this case, as there are a lot of failed bike-sharing companies, an investor could easily buy a company like oBike at a more reasonable price elsewhere the world," he said.

In the long term, Mr Chaves has no concerns that oBike would affect his reputation or that of 0mn1, and he is sure that oBike's debts would be resolved. "Because I am paying, (it's) that easy," he said.

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Wirecard's S'pore clients hope for clarity from probe

Ng Jun Sen
Business Correspondent

Some Singapore clients of global payment giant Wirecard are keeping watch as the German firm battles accusations of forgery and falsified accounts, while multiple investigations are under way.

For now, local companies, such as EZ-Link and Singtel, do not see much impact on Wirecard's operations on their cashless payment services.

An EZ-Link spokesman said: "We will continue to monitor the situation."

EZ-Link had worked with Wirecard to launch a smartphone top-up service for the ez-link card.

"We understand that Wirecard is cooperating with the authorities in investigations and we hope to see clarity soon," the spokesman added.

Police raided Wirecard's premises last Friday. Since then, several international law offices have started investigations into Wirecard on behalf of investors and are looking into a possible class action suit against it.

Wirecard has launched an internal inquiry and mandated law firm Rajah & Tann to investigate the allegations by a whistle-blower who tipped off Britain's Financial Times (FT). The payment group said it would sue FT over the publication of the three investigative reports on the allegations.

Wirecard, a blue-chip player on Germany's Dax index, has shed about US$10 billion (S$13.5 billion) in value since the reports first came out. Wirecard services can be found in more than 250,000 companies around the world, including Singapore, which is its base for expanding into the rest of Asia.

Founded in 1999, the fintech firm was known for providing payment services to pornography and gambling websites in its early days. The formula of combining technological know-how with a growing network of financial partners proved successful as countries and businesses sought to roll out cashless technology.

In 2008, ComfortDelGro outsourced the development of the cashless payment system for its Comfort and CityCab taxi fleet to Wirecard. That same year, Wirecard also helped set up and run MotorPay, an e-payment service that allows motorists to pay Electronic Road Pricing tolls using credit cards, with DBS Bank and the Land Transport Authority.

An LTA spokesman said it is unable to comment as police investigations are ongoing. Comfort did not respond by press time.

Wirecard partners Cheers to offer contactless payments at its outlets using ez-link cards, and also works with Singtel for its mobile wallet Dash.

A Singtel spokesman said: "Wirecard is one of several partners that we work with, and we do have alternative providers to minimise any disruption to our services."

In 2011, Wirecard signalled its aim to expand its Asian business by acquiring Singapore payment technology company Systems@Work. Already one of the leading fintech players here, Systems@Work had over 500 clients at the time, including banks, telcos and retailers.

Few Singaporeans are aware of Wirecard because it is the hidden "financial plumbing" that keeps businesses going, said Singapore University of Technology and Design senior lecturer of finance Douglas Streeter Rolph.

But Nanyang Business School associate professor Low Kin Yew said the incident could create doubts about the credibility of payment firms like Wirecard if it is found culpable. "If there are doubts about the credibility (of cashless payments), then user confidence will of course be affected."

Singapore FinTech Association president Chia Hock Lai said the investigations deserve time to fully address the allegations. "We keenly wait for the authorities to complete their work into the matter and respect the outcome of their findings."

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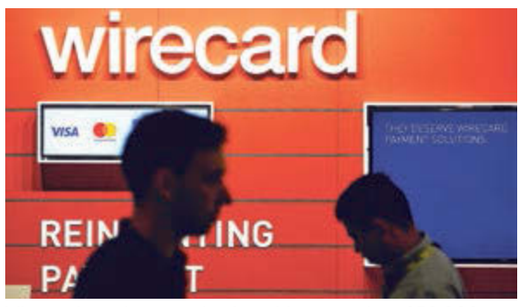

Wirecard services can be found in more than 250,000 firms around the world, including Singapore, which is its base for expanding into the rest of Asia. PHOTO: REUTERS

Most trainees find skills training useful for work: Poll

Joanna Seow

More than eight in 10 Singaporeans who attended SkillsFuture-funded courses last year found that their training helped them in their work, according to a survey by SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG).

They were asked about the quality of the course on the last day of training, and were surveyed again six months later on how useful they felt it had been in their work.

About 3,500 people were polled, said SSG chief executive Ng Cher Pong yesterday at a review of the statutory board's work last year.

The survey was a new initiative last year.

SSG had planned to assess training, although it is not a simple task, Mr Ng said as "the relationship between training and enhanced career opportunities or wage increases is difficult to measure as there are many other attributes that may affect it."

The survey will be rolled out for all SSG-funded courses on the Training Exchange section of the MySkillsFuture portal by the middle of this year.

SSG is also working on a longer-term study with the Ministry of Trade and Industry on the effectiveness of the Workforce Skills Qualifications programmes, said Mr Ng.

This year, it plans to enhance its MySkillsFuture portal, which provides information on careers and the required skills. For instance, users will be able to create an e-passport listing their e-certificates from training.

> **431,000**
>
> Number of people who have tapped SkillsFuture Credit since the scheme's launch in January 2016.

SSG will also expand its work-learn programmes and scale up the SkillsFuture Series – short training programmes in emerging areas such as data analytics and cyber security.

Mr Ng said more people are making use of government subsidies for training. About 146,000 Singaporeans started using their SkillsFuture Credit last year, bringing the total number who have tapped the subsidy to about 431,000 since the scheme's launch in January 2016.

The $500 credit is given to all Singaporeans aged 25 and older.

About 465,000 people and 12,000 enterprises took up various SkillsFuture subsidies last year. They used schemes such as SkillsFuture Study Awards for workers to deepen their capabilities in key sectors, and SkillsFuture Mid-Career Enhanced Subsidy, which pays up to 90 per cent of course fees for SSG-funded courses.

Since 2017, over 52,000 people have attended SkillsFuture Advice workshops on how to plan for their careers and upgrade their skills.

Take Ms Aryani Suhardi, 38, who became a chatbot trainer at insurer Prudential Singapore in 2017 after more than a decade in customer service. She said: "The workshop introduced me to the variety of SkillsFuture resources I could use for my self-development."

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More help for companies to train workers, tap new tech

Initiatives to help firms digitise, boost research and development to be unveiled in Budget 2019

Sue-Ann Tan

More initiatives will be announced in this year's Budget to help companies tap new technologies to enhance the way they operate, but they are also encouraged to send their employees for upskilling.

Disclosing this, Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry Koh Poh Koon said that by adopting new technologies and reskilling workers, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can be competitive not just locally but globally as well.

"I encourage SMEs to send staff for upskilling. Otherwise you can buy the technology, but your workforce may not be able to help you reap the full benefits," said Dr Koh, who made the remarks during a factory visit yesterday to medical technology manufacturing firm Racer.

The firm designs and manufactures high-value medical devices and laboratory equipment.

Details of the new initiatives will be announced in Budget 2019 and the Committee of Supply debates. The Budget statement will be delivered on Feb 18.

Dr Koh said the new initiatives will be aimed at helping SMEs digitise and further their research and development, as well as train their workforce to make use of these new technologies.

Medical tech firm Racer has seen a 70 per cent rise in efficiency and 70 per cent drop in manufacturing costs with new technology. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

TECH-READY WORKFORCE

> I encourage SMEs to send staff for upskilling. Otherwise you can buy the technology, but your workforce may not be able to help you reap the full benefits.
>
> SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY KOH POH KOON

"The existing platforms have more headroom to grow in terms of numbers and I hope SMEs sitting on the fringes will take the proactive step to come forward.

"We will be announcing some other measures that will help to encourage more training and some degree of funding support as well," he added.

Racer is one of many firms to tap the Agency for Science, Technology and Research's (A*Star) Model Factory Initiative.

Among other things, companies across the value chain learn about advanced manufacturing technologies in order to reinvent themselves through technology.

Since 2017, 137 projects have been formed under the initiative and 87 have been completed.

In Racer's case, employees now use a monitoring system to get live status updates of the company's machines on a centralised dashboard. They had to manually track these machines on paper previously.

Another system also helps to cut production planning time – from 28 hours to less than 10 hours a week – by streamlining production operations so that the company can track the status of job orders on the go.

As a result of the initiatives, Racer saw a 70 per cent increase in efficiency and 70 per cent reduction in manufacturing costs.

Dr Koh said: "For SMEs in the manufacturing space to remain competitive not just locally but also globally, digitisation as well as research and development and innovation are crucial ingredients for them to continue to succeed."

Technology aside, workers also need to be upskilled to make use of the new tools, he added.

Racer has sent workers for Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) courses, with 15 employees attending upgrading courses conducted by A*Star to learn to work on a digitised production line.

Over 4,000 professionals from almost 1,500 companies have received WSQ training run by A*Star.

"I urge SMEs to tap the many initiatives we have to bring together a stronger ecosystem and build a more resilient and competitive manufacturing sector," said Dr Koh.

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Upcoming mega-project launch will set tone for other condos: Analysts

Grace Leong
Business Correspondent

The upcoming launch of The Florence Residences – a mega project with more than 1,000 units – will likely set the tone for other developments heading to the market this year, some analysts say.

Between 400 and 500 units are expected to be released on March 2, depending on interest at the preview this weekend, said Mr Chng Chee Beow, executive director of Logan Property (Singapore), the developer. "We are targeting an average selling price of $1,450 per sq ft (psf)."

The 1,410-unit leasehold project in Hougang Avenue 2 comprises nine 18-storey towers. Units range from 474 sq ft one-bedders starting at below $700,000, to 1,668 sq ft five-bedders from $2.5 million. The two-bedroom units will likely be priced from under $900,000.

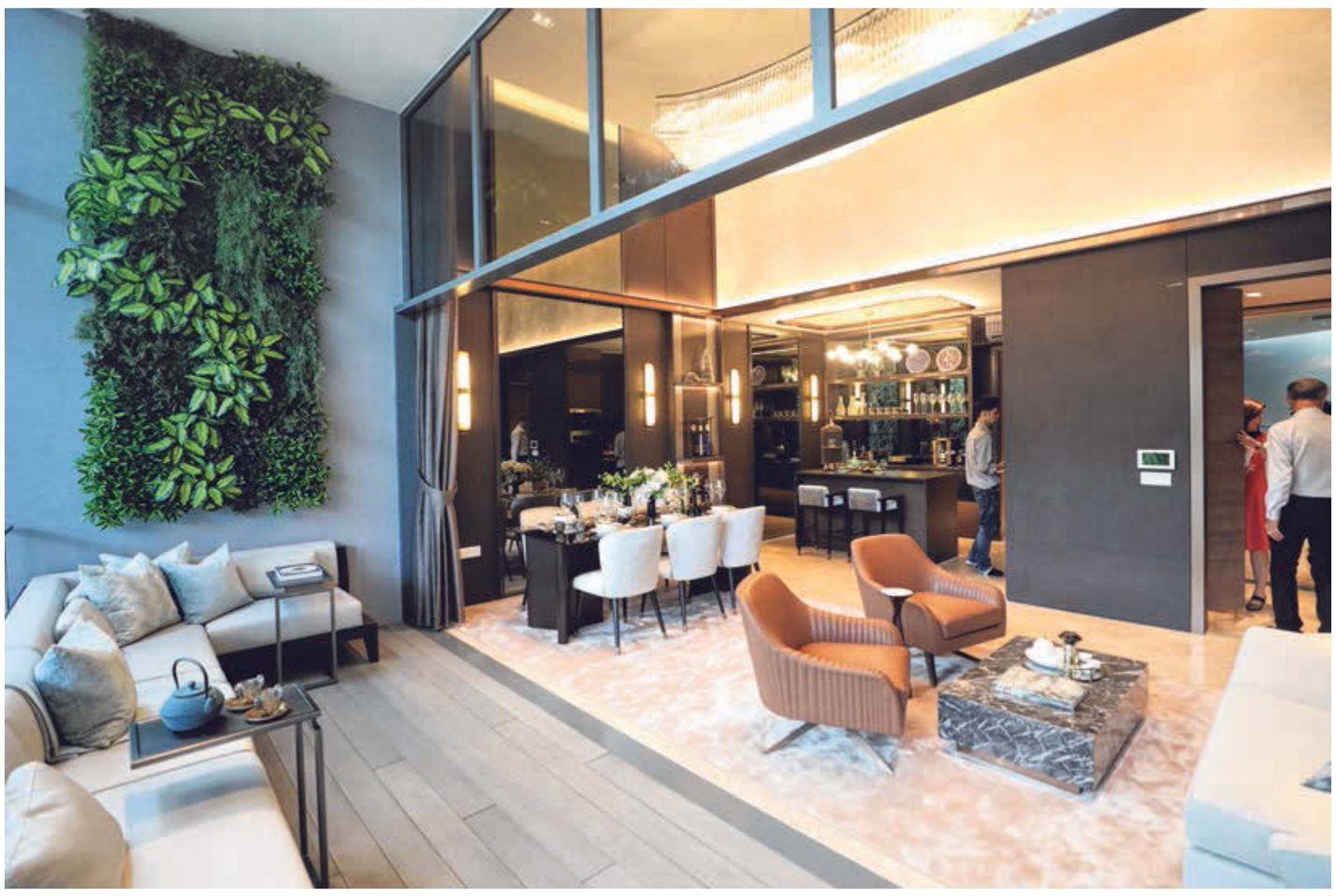
The project is being built on the site of the former Florence Regency and will have a "club condo" concept, including themed pavilions and facilities such as an 80m lagoon pool.

The development will be an eight-minute walk from Kovan MRT station and near the upcoming Hougang interchange station on the Cross Island Line.

Mr Chng said the project may appeal to investors who could rent to workers in Defu Industrial City, which is expected to be completed by 2021.

International Property Advisor chief executive Ku Swee Yong noted: "If they can sell 300 units in their first weekend of launch, that will be quite good.

"The question is whether demand for the Upper Serangoon area has been soaked up by neighbouring projects like Riverfront Residences, Affinity at Serangoon and The Garden Residences."



A show-flat of The Florence Residences, a 99-year leasehold condominium developed by Logan Property (Singapore). Between 400 and 500 units are expected to be released on March 2. The 1,410-unit project in Hougang Avenue 2 comprises nine 18-storey towers (top left). ST PHOTOS: TIMOTHY DAVID

Affinity at Serangoon has sold about 45 units at an average price of $1,475 psf since details of the new Cross Island Line were announced late last month. About 360 of the 650 units launched have been sold, according to developer Oxley Holdings.

Cumulative sales at the 1,472-unit Riverfront Residences in Hougang came to 837 as of last December, with 47 sold at the median price of $1,313 psf, official data shows.

Condos in the suburbs priced at above $2 million will likely face more challenges, said Mr Desmond Sim, head of research for Singapore and South-east Asia at CBRE. He added: "It will be interesting to see if the big units will move.

"This is the first of many launches to come. Buyers are still there, but may be spoilt for choice. Price and location are what they are looking out for. If they can't get the units they want, there's no rush to get in."

Hong Kong-listed Logan Property opted to build 1,410 units instead of the maximum allowed 1,446, a company spokesman said.

Mr Chng said: "If it's for owner-occupied (buyers), the unit size cannot be too small. Our smallest unit is around 480 sq ft, compared with the average shoebox unit, which can be as small as 400 sq ft."

A Land Transport Authority (LTA) spokesman said that there was no pre-application feasibility study (Pafs) for The Florence Residences as Logan's outline application was submitted prior to the Pafs requirement announced in November 2017.

"Nonetheless, LTA had required Logan to conduct a traffic impact assessment study. Localised road improvements will be implemented by the developer," it said.

The Logan spokesman said it will build an additional slip road within its development.

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CNY binge spending in China grows at slowest pace in years

8.5% year-on-year rise most sluggish since at least 2011, with profits of firms taking big hit

Increasingly frugal Chinese consumers are causing concern for global investors, with the pullback in spending hitting the profits of companies. Those who are still shopping are increasingly doing it online, with JD.com reporting a 43 per cent jump in sales around the holiday versus a year earlier. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

DOWNBEAT FORECAST

We believe household consumption will likely be sluggish. We expect the government to rely more on infrastructure investment to stabilise economic growth, but it may take time for infrastructure investment projects to start.

DR LU TING, chief China economist at Nomura Holdings, on the economic outlook for China.

BEIJING • The downward pressure on China's consumption persisted over the Chinese New Year holiday, the annual festival when people travel, shop, and give gifts or money.

People in China spent 1.01 trillion yuan (S$202 billion) at restaurants, shopping malls and online outlets over the week-long holiday, according to the Ministry of Commerce. That was 8.5 per cent higher than during last year's festive period, but the slowest rise since at least 2011.

Increasingly frugal Chinese consumers are sending chills through global investors, with the pullback in spending hitting the profits of companies such as Apple, Swatch Group and luxury carmakers.

Weaker growth, the trade war with the US, and a crackdown on debt undercut momentum last year, sending car purchases into contraction for the first time in almost three decades and retail sales growth to the slowest pace since 2002.

"We believe household consumption will likely be sluggish," wrote Dr Lu Ting, chief China economist at Nomura Holdings, citing the quick build-up of household debt and lacklustre income growth outlook amid the economic slowdown and the cooling property sector.

"We expect the government to rely more on infrastructure investment to stabilise economic growth, but it may take time for infrastructure investment projects to start."

Spending at tourist venues rose 8.2 per cent to 513.9 billion yuan, state broadcaster CCTV reported, citing data from the Ministry of Commerce, slower than the 12.6 per cent rise last year. Domestic box office revenue was 1 per cent higher than last year, according to a report in The Paper, which cited statistics from a cinema ticketing service platform of Alibaba Pictures.

Those who are still shopping are increasingly doing it online, with JD.com reporting a 43 per cent jump in sales around the holiday versus a year earlier. Cellphones, computers and home appliances were at the top of shopping lists, and there was a surge in purchases of kitchenware and furniture, according to a report from the second largest e-commerce site in the nation.

Spending growth in smaller cities jumped 55 per cent on Alibaba's Tmall, faster than in major metropolises where residents are being squeezed by higher housing prices.

Tourists chose Hong Kong, Thailand and Macau as their top overseas destinations, according to Alibaba's online tourism site. The United States was the seventh-most popular spot, despite the trade tensions.

China mainland visitors to Macau reached almost 900,000 during the week-long Chinese New Year holiday, climbing 26 per cent from last year's festive holiday, according to Macau's tourism office. That was more than double last year's growth.

The Chinese New Year holiday falls on different dates in January or February each year.

During the holiday, hundreds of millions travel to their home towns or go overseas, visit relatives and dine out. This year's holiday was from Feb 4 to Feb 10, while it was Feb 15 to Feb 21 last year. BLOOMBERG

Ex-UOB employee in London sues over 'unfair dismissal'

LONDON • A former employee at United Overseas Bank's (UOB) London branch is suing over unfair dismissal, after saying he was denied a new job because he is not Asian.

Mr Daniel Smith, who worked at Singapore's third-largest bank for over 20 years, said a manager told him that a candidate from Southeast Asia was a better "fit" for a role. Mr Smith said the minutes of the meeting were later altered when he questioned the comments, and he lost his position shortly afterwards.

"To have been overlooked... and discriminated in the way I was, is such a big let-down, given everything I had given to the bank," he said in a court filing.

In British employment cases, an award is capped at around £84,000 (S$147,000) unless workers can show discrimination or that they were blowing the whistle on improper actions. UOB's lawyer said Mr Smith was "kicking up dust" to get a larger payout.

Mr Smith, who was a senior officer in the bank's treasury business, was initially asked to apply for new roles, as the London branch ceased to offer clearing services. He said the general manager, Mr Andy Cheah, told him the bank had found an Asian candidate "who would fit into UOB well".

While Mr Cheah acknowledged that he had used the "descriptive" term that the candidate was Asian, he said "her race and nationality have absolutely nothing to do with her selection".

Mr Smith said UOB changed the minutes of the meeting that originally described how the candidate had to "fit into UOB, which had a strong Asian influence", to read that the candidate needed an "ability to fit into UOB's banking culture".

Mr Smith, who worked at UOB from 1993 to 2017, said he felt he "wasn't good enough just because I was not South-east Asian".

In response to queries from The Straits Times, a UOB spokesman said the bank is committed to ensuring equal employment opportunities based on merit, such as having the relevant skills.

"The promotion of cultural, ethnic, gender and other forms of diversity is a critical part of the group's strategy in serving our diverse client base." BLOOMBERG

• Additional reporting by Derek Wong

Wealth magazine's first edition for this year proffers a cogent view of asset markets at a time when volatility threatens to keep investors on the sidelines. PHOTO: BUSINESS TIMES

Gokongwei scion shares vision in Wealth magazine

Mr Lance Gokongwei, son of Philippine billionaire John Gokongwei Jr, has big shoes to fill.

The elder Mr Gokongwei is the Philippines' third-wealthiest tycoon with a net worth of US$5 billion (S$6.8 billion). He built JG Summit Holdings, a sprawling conglomerate, from a single corn starch factory in 1956.

The younger Mr Gokongwei – the only son among six siblings – does not recall having a conversation with his father about taking over the business, but he has made his mark in the corporate world with over three decades in various operating units. Last year, he became JG Summit's chief executive.

He most notably blazed a trail when he was at the helm of Cebu Pacific. The budget carrier had just five planes in 1996. Today it has a fleet of more than 70 aircraft.

Mr Gokongwei shares his vision in the latest Wealth magazine, distributed with The Business Times today.

Wealth's first edition for this year also proffers a cogent view of asset markets at a time when volatility threatens to keep investors on the sidelines.

In the Roundtable, expert panellists agree that a global recession is not imminent even if growth expectations have been adjusted downwards. The experts' asset picks include equities, emerging markets local currency bonds and high-yield credits, which were beaten down last year.

In the Real Estate column, Knight Frank research head Lee Nai Jia is optimistic about the Singapore residential market this year. He expects prime property to stay resilient while rents are also expected to improve.

British economy's growth slowest in six years on Brexit jitters

LONDON • Britain buckled under the strain of Brexit uncertainty in the fourth quarter of last year.

Its economy grew at the slowest pace in six years in 2018 with output almost flat in the final quarter, said Agence France-Presse, citing a report.

Gross domestic product (GDP) increased a smaller-than-forecast 0.2 per cent, compared with 0.6 per cent in the third quarter. December alone saw the economy shrink by 0.4 per cent, the most since before the 2016 vote to leave the European Union.

The slowdown over the quarter came as businesses cut investment for a fourth consecutive quarter, the longest continuous decline since the financial crisis, and the weakening global economy hit trade. The pound fell 0.3 per cent to US$1.2909 as of 9.46am in London yesterday.

There was no widespread evidence of stockpiling as the prospect of a no-deal Brexit looms larger. Inventories rose just £1.6 billion (S$2.8 billion) in the quarter.

While organisations such as Heathrow Airport and Unilever have said they are keeping more on the storeroom shelf to guard against disruptions to supplies brought in from the EU, the Office for National Statistics said a relatively small number of firms reported doing so.

The economy is facing the worst year for growth since 2009, with economists warning of a recession if Britain leaves the EU without a deal to smooth the transition on March 29. The Bank of England sees growth of 0.2 per cent in the first quarter, but the sudden loss of momentum at the end of last year suggests that the economy could stagnate, as indicated in recent purchasing manager surveys.

With wage pressure building, the central bank might in different circumstances be preparing to raise interest rates. But officials last week signalled they have no intention of doing so until the "fog of Brexit" has cleared.

Brexit is not the only threat facing the economy. Major markets from the euro zone to China are losing momentum, weakening demand for British exports. Net trade cut 0.12 percentage point from growth in the fourth quarter as the trade deficit hit the highest in more than two years.

The fear gripping business was illustrated this month when Japanese carmaker Nissan scrapped plans to build a new model in Sunderland. Airbus, which makes wings for commercial aircraft in Britain, has also threatened to switch investment elsewhere. Business investment fell 0.9 per cent last year.

Brexit is not the only threat facing the economy. Major markets from the euro zone to China are losing momentum, weakening demand for British exports. Net trade cut 0.12 percentage point from growth in the fourth quarter as the trade deficit hit the highest in more than two years.

Consumer spending growth stayed at 0.4 per cent in the fourth quarter but business investment slumped 1.4 per cent, the most since the start of 2016. Services, the largest part of economy, slowed to 0.4 per cent growth.

In December, all the main sectors of the economy shrank, with manufacturing falling for a sixth consecutive month, the longest run of declines since the financial crisis. The fall in overall GDP was the largest since March 2016.

Growth last year slowed to 1.4 per cent, and the Bank of England sees a further moderation this year to 1.2 per cent. GDP rose 1.3 per cent in the fourth quarter from a year earlier, the weakest since the second quarter of 2012. BLOOMBERG

Rare B2 Factory at Seletar For Sale
110 Seletar Aerospace View, Singapore 797562

★ Land Area: Approx. 189,339 sqft
★ Gross Floor Area: Approx. 99,555 sqft
★ URA Master Plan (2014): Business 2
★ Tenure: JTC 30 + 10 years from Dec 2009
★ Specialised facility for aviation industry

Brenda Ong 9616 3336 Salesperson Reg. No. R002924Z
Jonathan Tan 8113 9192 Salesperson Reg. No. R002911H
For Sale By Expression of Interest Closing Date: 5 April 2019, 3pm Friday
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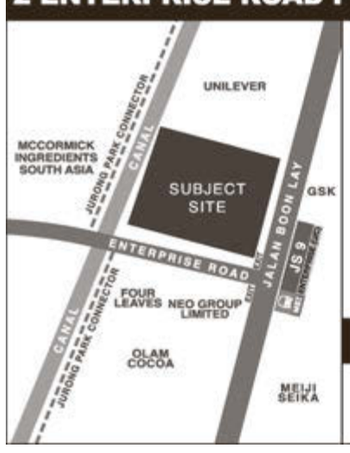
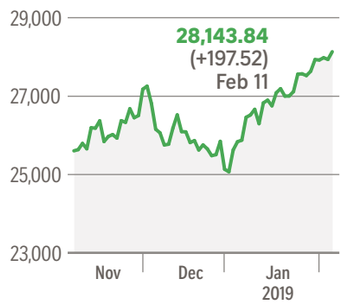


- Single-storey food factory with mezzanine office
- Warehouse (aircon/non-aircon), chiller rooms and freezer rooms
- Situated within the designated "Chin Bee" food zone
- Adjacent to future Enterprise MRT Station (JS 9)
- Zoned "Business 2" with plot ratio 2.5
- JTC leasehold with balance of approx. 14 years
- Site Area: 16,234.2 sq m (174,743 sq ft approx.)
- Gross Floor Area: 14,084.7 sq m (151,606 sq ft approx.)

FOR SALE BY PRIVATE TREATY
LYNUS POOK (R049306Z) +65 9337 3217
SIM CHEE JIN (R031201D) +65 9761 1211

Hang Seng



Shanghai Comp

Nikkei 225

Dow Jones

BullsAndBears

Local banks lift S'pore market after early dip

Field almost evenly matched on bourse, with decliners edging out gainers

Lynette Tan

There wasn't much to inspire investors yesterday although the three local banks flexed their muscles to lift the market.

The Straits Times Index was down for the first half of the day but regained its footing to climb 4.23 points, or 0.13 per cent, to 3,206.27.

The banks had a similar trajectory – down initially before rallying after lunch.

DBS Group Holdings was off 0.53 per cent at the open but gained 0.25 per cent to $24.36 on the day, while United Overseas Bank (UOB) recovered from an early 0.87 per cent dip to end 0.4 per cent ahead at $25.34. It was much the same for OCBC Bank – down 0.78 per cent before reversing losses to add 0.44 per cent at $11.53.

The three banks will release their full-year earnings soon. Citi Research analysts expect results to be broadly in line for UOB and OCBC, but a potential return on equity disappointment for DBS.

"UOB is our top pick due to its relatively defensive position versus peers – lower exposure to wealth management/China, plus a strong capital position," said the analysts.

The field was almost evenly matched on the bourse with 196 decliners to 190 gainers. Turnover stood at 1.55 billion securities worth $1.06 billion.

The actives included blue-chip Genting Singapore, which lost 2.7 per cent to $1.08 with 41.77 million shares traded. Thai Beverage was another active, paring 1.39 per cent to 71 cents on trade of 41.67 million shares.

Other losses came from First Reit, which slid 4.39 per cent to $1.09 following a "sell" call from OCBC Investment Research.

On the property front, City Developments fared better, rising 2.4 per cent to $9.38 after financial group Jefferies upgraded its call to "buy".

APAC Realty gained 1.01 per cent to 50 cents after the real estate agency announced it was acquiring the ERA master franchisor for Indonesia and taking direct ownership of the Thailand ERA master franchise through a partnership.

Decliners included SIA Engineering, down 5.16 per cent to $2.39 after posting lacklustre third-quarter earnings last Friday.

USP Group, which is on the Singapore Exchange's watchlist, plunged 17.5 per cent to 6.6 cents after the group sank into the red in the third quarter.

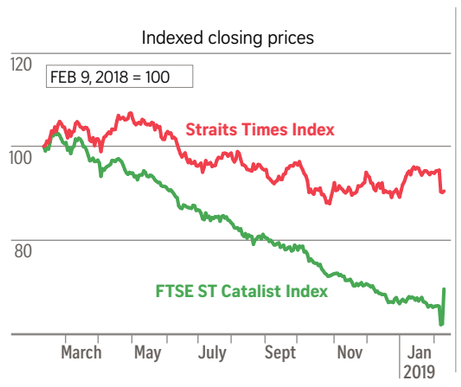
8Telecom International ended flat. It has not been given the green light by the Singapore Exchange to issue new shares, including those it had intended to issue to pay for a partial acquisition in China.

tanlyn@sph.com.sg

DAILY

Straits Times Index

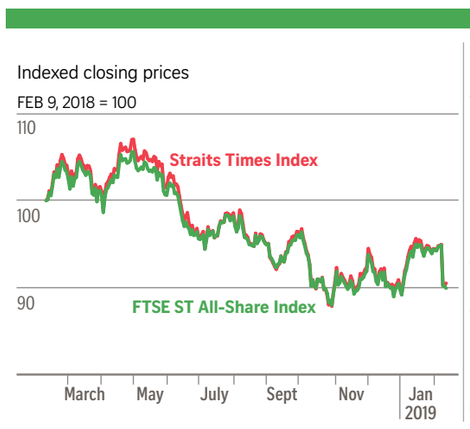
Feb 11, 2019
3,206.27 ⬆
+4.23 (+0.13%)
Current streak
3 days
Day high
3,206.27
Day low
3,174.00
52-week high
3,615.28 (May 2, 2018)
52-week low
2,966.45 (Oct 30, 2018)



FTSE ST Catalist Index

Feb 11, 2019
⬇ **301.01**
-0.73 (-0.24%)
Current streak
1 day
Day high
303.15
Day low
300.18
52-week high
469.26 (Feb 21, 2018)
52-week low
300.24 (Feb 1, 2019)

DAILY



FTSE ST All-Share Index

Feb 11, 2019
⬆ **779.69**
+0.94 (+0.12%)
Current streak
3 days
Day high
779.69
Day low
773.24
52-week high
868.02 (April 30, 2018)
52-week low
722.91 (Oct 30, 2018)

Citibank Singapore's former CEO joining DBS

The former chief executive of Citibank Singapore, Mr Han Kwee Juan, will join DBS Group Holdings as group head of strategy and planning in April, DBS announced yesterday.

He will report to DBS Group chief executive Piyush Gupta and be a member of the group management committee. He will occupy the role held previously by Mr Shee Tse Koon, who became DBS' Singapore country head in December last year.

Mr Han, 51, became CEO of Citibank Singapore in 2012. In that role, he had oversight of Citi's onshore retail banking, wealth management, cards and personal loans, mortgage and retail small and medium-sized enterprise businesses in Singapore. He spent 27 years at the American bank, leading businesses in consumer banking, corporate banking and transaction banking.

Mr Gupta said in a statement yesterday that the bank has over the years made it a point to build its leadership primarily through growing its own timber, resulting in many capable leaders.

"However, from time to time, it is also good to supplement our bench with external talent, allowing us to gain from new perspectives. Kwee Juan will be a good addition, and I look forward to leading this solid team as we continue on our journey to enrich lives, transform businesses and make a sustainable difference in the communities we operate in," he said.

Mr Han Kwee Juan, who spent 27 years at Citibank, will be group head of strategy and planning at DBS Group Holdings.

Straits Times Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	52-WEEK LOW	COMPANY	CURRENCY TRADED	LAST SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS YIELD %	P/BV
278	245	**Ascendas Reit**		274	-1	17801	5.8	1.3
192	161	**CapitaCom Trust**		189	-1	11797	4.6	1
380	298	**CapitaLand**		332	unch	5173	3.6	0.7
243	195	**CapitaMall Trust**		239	-1	9074	4.8	1.2
1359	780	**CityDev**		938	+22	2532	1.9	0.8
251	196	**ComfortDelGro**		233	-1	4719	4.5	2
3128	2265	**DBS Grp**		2436	+6	3230	5.9	1.4
994	767	**DairyFarm USD**	US	896	-4	214	2.3	-
133	85.5	**Genting Sing**		108	-3	41768	3.2	1.7
37	22.5	**Golden Agri-Res**		25.5	+0.5	15818	3.2	0.6
37	23	**HPH Trust USD**	US	25.5	-0.5	6281	10.3	0.4
744	588	**HongkongLand USD**	US	704	-2	2466	2.8	0.3
6974	1099	**JMH USD**	US	6860	+142	231	2.3	0.7
4078	3155	**JSH USD**	US	3950	+99	157	0.8	0.4
3828	2766	**Jardine C&C**		3719	-23	299	3.1	1.8
835	567	**Keppel Corp**		601 cd	-3	4029	5	1
1404	1036	**OCBC Bank**		1153	+5	3217	3.2	1.2
564	455	**SATS**		482	-4	1369	3.7	3.3
778	672	**SGX**		758	-3	1258	4	9.5
1184	914	**SIA**		971	-5	789	4.1	0.8
292	231	**SPH**		247	-2	2082	5.3	1.1
376	321	**ST Engineering**		370	-5	2875	4.1	5.4
341	243	**Sembcorp Ind**		255	unch	2239	2	0.7
358	283	**Singtel**		305	-1	12455	6.7	1.7
92	57.5	**ThaiBev**		71	-1	41668	0.9	3.5
3037	2380	**UOB**		2534	+10	2368	3.9	1.2
898	591	**UOL**		657	-1	1580	2.7	0.6
2965	1320	**Venture Corp**		1597	+25	1122	3.8	2
335	297	**Wilmar Intl**		326	-3	3845	3.1	1
154	84	**YZJ Shipbldg SGD**		141	-4	28525	3.2	1

FTSE ST Large & Mid-Cap Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	52-WEEK LOW	COMPANY	CURRENCY TRADED	LAST SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS YIELD %	P/BV
278	245	**Ascendas Reit**		274	-1	17801	5.8	1.3
120	105	**Ascott Reit**		116	unch	1699	6.2	1
74.5	59	**Bumitama Agri**		68.5	unch	79	1.1	1.6
178	143	**CDL HTrust**		160 xd	-2	1872	-	1
192	161	**CapitaCom Trust**		189	-1	11797	4.6	1
380	298	**CapitaLand**		332	unch	5173	3.6	0.7
243	195	**CapitaMall Trust**		239	-1	9074	4.8	1.2
164	133	**CapitaR China Tr**		147 cd	-1	1677	7	1
1359	780	**CityDev**		938	+22	2532	1.9	0.8
251	196	**ComfortDelGro**		233	-1	4719	4.5	2
3128	2265	**DBS Grp**		2436	+6	3230	5.9	1.4
994	767	**DairyFarm USD**	US	896	-4	214	2.3	-
73.5	59	**Far East HTrust**		65	-1.5	5265	-	0.8
183	150	**First Resources**		172	+1	1841	4	2.2
231	212	**Frasers Cpt Tr**		227	+1	592	5.3	109.1
112	101	**Frasers L&I Tr**		111	+3	8414	6.2	1.2
133	85.5	**Genting Sing**		108	-3	41768	3.2	1.7
37	22.5	**Golden Agri-Res**		25.5	+0.5	15818	3.2	0.6
224	167	**GuocoLand Ltd**		185	unch	52	3.8	0.6
37	23	**HPH Trust USD**	US	25.5	-0.5	6281	10.3	0.4
744	588	**HongkongLand USD**	US	704	-2	2466	2.8	0.3
6974	1099	**JMH USD**	US	6860	+142	231	2.3	0.7
4078	3155	**JSH USD**	US	3950	+99	157	0.8	0.4
3828	2766	**Jardine C&C**		3719	-23	299	3.1	1.8
58	44.5	**Kep Infra Tr**		50	-0.5	3314	7.4	1.8
835	567	**Keppel Corp**		601 cd	-3	4029	5	1
124	108	**Keppel Reit**		122	+1	16465	4.6	0.9
215	151	**M1**		204 cd	-1	3732	5.5	3.6
273	170	**Man Oriental USD**	US	202	+6	181	1.5	1.5
186	152	**Mapletree Com Tr**		180	-2	12968	5	1.2
206	184	**Mapletree Ind Tr**		203	+1	3545	5.8	1.4
140	118	**Mapletree Log Tr**		139	unch	16476	5.5	1.2
128	107	**Mapletree NAC Tr**		125	-1	6049	6	0.9
83	73	**NetLink NBN Tr**		80	+2	43700	-	1
1404	1036	**OCBC Bank**		1153	+5	3217	3.2	1.2
199	136	**OUE**		151	-3	289	2	0.3
87	64.5	**OUE HTrust**		71	-0.5	484	-	0.9
250	157	**Olam Intl**		187	unch	339	4	1
59	28	**Oxley**		30	unch	3601	5	0.9
291	256	**ParkwayLife Reit**		281	-3	605	4.6	1.5
121	98	**Raffles Medical**		111	+1	608	2	2.6
564	455	**SATS**		482	-4	1369	3.7	3.3
778	672	**SGX**		758	-3	1258	4	9.5
1184	914	**SIA**		971	-5	789	4.1	0.8
337	220	**SIA Engineering**		239	-13	1355	5.4	1.8
292	231	**SPH**		247	-2	2082	5.3	1.1
103	98	**SPHREIT**		102	unch	885	5.4	1.1
376	321	**ST Engineering**		370	-5	2875	4.1	5.4
341	243	**Sembcorp Ind**		255	unch	2239	2	0.7
272	149	**Sembcorp Marine**		159	+1	3480	1.3	1.4
58	39	**Silverlake Axis**		50	+1.5	11819	6	7.3
147	88.5	**SingPost**		94.5 cd	-0.5	4456	3.7	1.3
358	283	**Singtel**		305	-1	12455	6.7	1.7
286	158	**StarHub**		191	-3	2048	8.4	5.8
74	63.5	**StarhillGbl Reit**		71	unch	1571	6.4	0.8
199	163	**Suntec Reit**		190	-2	9136	5.3	0.9
92	57.5	**ThaiBev**		71	-1	41668	0.9	3.5
10.2	3.7	**Thomson Medical**		7.7	-0.1	6051	-	2.8
3037	2380	**UOB**		2534	+10	2368	3.9	1.2
898	591	**UOL**		657	-1	1580	2.7	0.6
2965	1320	**Venture Corp**		1597	+25	1122	3.8	2
335	297	**Wilmar Intl**		326	-3	3845	3.1	1
226	183	**Wing Tai**		204	+1	418	3.9	0.5
154	84	**YZJ Shipbldg SGD**		141	-4	28525	3.2	1
182	116	**Yanlord Land**		140	+7	5191	4.9	0.6

FTSE ST Small-Cap Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	52-WEEK LOW	COMPANY	LAST SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS YIELD %	P/BV
145	129	**AIMSAMP Cap Reit**	139 cd	-1	525	7.4	1
68.5	48	**Accordia Golf Tr**	55.5	+0.5	626	6.9	0.6
86.5	74	**Ascendas-hTrust**	84.5	unch	715	-	0.9
119	99	**Ascendas-iTrust**	112	-1	1132	5.4	1.3
58	12.2	**Asian Pay TV Tr**	13.3	unch	2498	48.9	0.2
64	48	**Banyan Tree**	59.5	unch	570	1.7	0.8
330	115	**Best World**	330	+11	4358	1.2	11.8
85.5	76	**Boustead**	80	unch	62	3.8	1.2
126	79.5	**BreadTalk**	90	+3.5	513	7.8	2.4
632	521	**Bukit Sembawang**	563	+5	33	3.2	1.1
87	65.5	**Cache Log Trust**	71.5	-0.5	1860	8.3	1.1
52	39.5	**Centurion**	40	-0.5	8	6.3	0.7
166	104	**China Aviation**	124	+6	3043	3.6	1
46	29.5	**China Everbright**	35	-1	2216	1.4	0.7
165	90.5	**China Sunsine**	129	+1	1197	2.3	1.4
103	64	**Chip Eng Seng**	69.5	unch	1051	5.8	0.6
53.5	31.5	**Cosco**	35.5	unch	2352	-	1.5
700	302	**Delong**	580	-5	12	-	0.6
27.5	17.5	**Duty Free Intl**	20 xd	-1	600	9.3	1.3
77	67.5	**EC World Reit**	74	+0.5	125	8.1	0.9
59	47	**ESR-REIT**	51.5	unch	984	7.5	1.1
140	92	**First Reit**	109	-5	2887	7.9	1.1
152	135	**Frasers Com Tr**	146	-4	2759	6.6	0.9
80	66.5	**Frasers HTrust**	73.5	+0.5	471	-	1
25.5	16.4	**Geo Energy Res**	19.7	+0.1	409	5.1	1.2
91	70.5	**HRnetGroup**	77	unch	846	3	2.4
67.5	52	**Health Mgt Intl**	54	unch	217	0.6	5.2
279	73	**Hi-P Intl**	102	+9.5	15131	24.5	1.5
283	252	**Hong Leong Fin**	267	+2	87	4.9	0.6
80.5	71	**IREIT Global**	75.5	unch	36	7.9	1.1
37	18.3	**Indofood Agri**	22	+0.5	414	-	0.3
84	43	**Japfa**	80	+0.5	3415	0.6	1.5
76.5	49	**KSH**	51	-0.5	26	4.3	0.9
85	53	**Kep-KBS Reit USD**	66.5	unch	692	9.4	0.6
149	128	**Keppel DC Reit**	143	-1	3852	5.1	1.3
189	132	**Keppel T&T**	188	unch	28	-	1.2
11.9	7	**KrisEnergy**	8.1	-0.2	11049	-	1
71	44.5	**Lian Beng**	49	+1	387	4.6	0.4
40.5	18	**Lippo Malls Tr**	24.5	-1	4110	14	0.9
53	30	**MM2 Asia**	32.5	unch	195	-	1.8
95	69.5	**ManulifeReit USD**	85.5 cd	+0.5	846	6.5	0.8
120	95	**Metro**	99	-0.5	86	5.1	0.6
21.5	5	**Noble**	8.1	susp	-	-	-
63.4	45	**OUE Com Reit**	49.5 xd	-0.5	983	7	0.7
66	54	**PEC**	57	unch	71	3.5	0.6
39.5	17	**POSH**	18.3	-0.2	110	-	0.5
64.5	44.5	**Q&M Dental**	48.5	-0.5	1030	3.3	3.5
110	55.5	**QAF Ltd**	70.5	unch	97	7.1	0.8
124	96	**Riverstone**	112	unch	54	2.1	3.7
54.5	22	**SIIC Environment**	33	+0.5	641	-	0.6
45	38	**Sabana Reit**	42	+0.5	606	7.6	0.7
119	90.5	**Sheng Siong**	110	-1	602	3	6.1
25.5	3.3	**Sino Grandness**	5.2	-0.1	1801	-	0.1
69	56	**SoilbuildBizReit**	60	unch	506	8.8	1
129	80.5	**Tianjin ZX USD**	88	-0.5	254	-	0.7
46.5	32.5	**Tuan Sing**	38.5 cd	unch	494	2.3	0.4
136	54	**UMS**	68.5	+2.5	8097	7.3	1.6
112	58.5	**Valuetronics**	75	+2	4732	6.1	171.7
15	8.3	**Ying Li Intl**	12.5	+0.2	9237	-	0.3
48.5	24	**Yoma Strategic**	34.5	+2	7306	0.7	0.9
33	16.1	**Yongnam**	17.3	-0.3	1431	-	0.3

Price and volume movers

	VOL	CLOSE($)	CHANGE	+/-
Yunnan Energy	3.0	0.125	-0.440	-77.88
Meghmani SDS	16.7	0.515	-0.165	-24.27
Sinjia Land	500.0	0.011	+0.002	+22.22
Boldtek	103.6	0.120	-0.028	-18.92
Eindec	62.6	0.042	-0.007	-14.29
Kori	27.0	0.305	-0.035	-10.29
Adventus	3,400.0	0.005	+0.001	+25.00
AsiaMedic	231.0	0.021	+0.003	+16.67
Azeus	30.0	0.365	-0.075	-17.05
Libra	155.0	0.100	-0.030	-23.08

Shows the stocks with the highest combination of price change and of daily activity relative to the three-month average volume

ETFs

52-Week High	52-Week Low	Counter	Last Sale	+/-	Vol ('000)	Last Quote Buy	Last Quote Sell
116.9	110	**ABF SG Bond ETF**	113.3	+0.1	36	113.2	113.4
93.8	82.5	**CIMB APAC Div US$**	US88.8	-	-	90.3	91.1
1176	626	**CIMBASEAN40 US$**	US1003	-	-	992	998
12895	11025	**GLD US$**	US12358	-	0	12358	12383
1419	1330	**IS ASIA HYG S$D**	1382	-2	3	1382	1396
1073	970	**IS ASIA HYG US$**	US1002	-19	20	1002	1020
1060	1002	**IS Asia BND US**	US1038	-5	6	1038	1041
1016	467	**IS MS INDIA US$**	US821	-14	6	823	826
104.5	94.4	**Lion-Phillip S-REIT**	102.8	-0.7	322	102.7	103.1
375	302	**Nikko AM STI ETF**	327	-	40	326	328
100.6	98.8	**NikkoAM SGD IGBond ETF**	100.1	+0.1	24	100	100.1
84.2	76.3	**NikkoAM-STC A_REIT US$**	US82.5	-	-	86.8	87.2
148.2	104.7	**NikkoAM-STC Asia REIT**	118	-0.3	76	118	118.4
105.7	99	**PHIL SING INC**	105.5	+0.1	25	105.1	106
130	93.2	**Phil Ap Div Reit US$**	US104.2	+1.2	0	104.2	104.5
365.8	300	**STI ETF**	319.5	-0.3	250	319.8	320
4164	3373	**XT ASX200 US$**	US3750	+50	-	-	-
685.5	375.1	**XT MSBrazil US$**	US513.1	-	-	515.5	520.9
2090	1470	**XT MSCHINA US$**	US1701	+14	0	1650	2000
8311	6252	**XT MSKorea US$**	US6852	-168	-	-	-
206.3	154.9	**XT MSPHILS US$**	US191.7	-	-	187	200
634	530	**XT MSPacXJp US$**	US599	-	-	596	604
3014	2532	**XT MSTaiwan US$**	US2640	-	-	2546	-
5292	4210	**XT S&P500 US$**	US4814	-	-	-	-
4044	2850	**XT Vietnam US$**	US3021	+54	2	2908	3200

Gainers

BY CENTS

	CLOSE	UP	%
JMH USD	6860	192.7	2.1
JSH USD	3950	134.3	2.6
Great Eastern	2659	46.0	1.8
Venture Corp	1597	25.0	1.6
CityDev	938	22.0	2.4
Creative	557	17.0	3.1
Best World	330	11.0	3.4
UOB	2534	10.0	0.4
Hi-P Intl	102	9.5	10.3
Man Oriental USD	202	8.1	3.1

BY PERCENTAGE

	CLOSE	%	UP
KLW Hldgs	0.6	50.0	0.2
CWX Global	0.4	33.3	0.1
Oceanus	0.4	33.3	0.1
Manhattan Res	2.8	27.3	0.6
Adventus	0.5	25.0	0.1
Starland	11	23.6	2.1
Sinjia Land	1.1	22.2	0.2
Nam Cheong	0.6	20.0	0.1
Silkroad Nickel	45	20.0	7.5
AsiaMedic	2.1	16.7	0.3

Losers

BY CENTS

	CLOSE	DOWN	%
Yunnan Energy	12.5	-44.0	-77.9
Jardine C&C	3719	-23.0	-0.6
Meghmani SDS	51.5	-16.5	-24.3
SIA Engineering	239	-13.0	-5.2
Haw Par Corp	1210	-12.0	-1.0
UOI	720	-12.0	-1.6
Azeus	36.5	-7.5	-17.0
Union Gas	22	-5.5	-20.0
DairyFarm USD	896	-5.4	-0.4
Delong	580	-5.0	-0.9

BY PERCENTAGE

	CLOSE	%	DOWN
Yunnan Energy	12.5	-77.9	-44.0
China Real Estate	0.1	-50.0	-0.1
ISR Capital	0.2	-50.0	-0.2
Plastoform	1.4	-33.3	-0.7
Compact Metal	2	-31.0	-0.9
Rich Capital	0.3	-25.0	-0.1
Meghmani SDS	51.5	-24.3	-16.5
Libra	10	-23.1	-3.0
Union Gas	22	-20.0	-5.5
Boldtek	12	-18.9	-2.8

Most active

	VOLUME
MDR	267,939,800
Ezion	63,795,800
NetLink NBN Tr	43,700,700
Genting Sing	41,768,900
ThaiBev	41,668,500
Rex Intl	32,829,100
YZJ Shipbldg SGD	28,525,100
AEM	19,545,900
Ascendas Reit	17,801,000
Mapletree Log Tr	16,476,400
Market volume	**1,552,010,000**

	VALUE ($)
DBS Grp	78,125,058
UOB	59,465,844
Ascendas Reit	48,827,918
Genting Sing	45,345,052
YZJ Shipbldg SGD	40,269,325
Singtel	37,866,237
OCBC Bank	36,774,951
NetLink NBN Tr	34,732,492
ThaiBev	29,896,600
Keppel Corp	24,204,087
Market value	**1,014,212,000**

Bonds

Company	Last Sale	+or-	Vol ('000)
CapMallTrb3.08%21022	101	-	-
CityDev NCCPS	107.7	-	-
DBS Bk 4.7% NCPS	10520	+10	1
FPTrea 3.65%n220522	101.2	unch	57
Hyflux 6% CPS	6537	susp	-
UE Pref	190	-	-

New incubator scheme for early-stage start-ups

Nine-month programme by Trive and JustCo offers mentorship, support and resources to firms

A start-up incubation programme for young entrepreneurs by venture capital firm Trive Ventures and JustCo Lab has garnered "plenty of interest".

The nine-month programme – named Trive Labs – offers early-stage enterprises support, resources and mentorship through JustCo, one of Asia's largest co-working communities.

Qualifying firms get complimentary hot-desking access at the JustCo Lab in Marina Square, said a joint statement by Trive and JustCo yesterday.

Start-ups in the programme also get immediate access to JustCo's regional community of more than 17,000 members – from start-ups to small and medium-sized enterprises to Fortune 500 companies.

And they have access to a suite of JustCo's and Trive's business benefits, including flexible workspaces, complimentary business services, workshops, exclusive event invitations and community network opportunities.

Mentors who are "successful entrepreneurs and seniors in the corporate world" are on hand as well.

The JustCo Lab also hosts hackathons and masterclasses to educate and provide more exposure for members.

$20k

Trive Labs is for entrepreneurs who have successfully attained the Startup SG Founder grant with Trive as an accredited mentor partner, or have attained external funding exceeding this sum.

Trive Labs is designed for entrepreneurs who have successfully attained the Startup SG Founder grant with Trive as an accredited mentor partner, or have attained external funding exceeding $20,000.

Start-ups must also have a defensible tech slant and a positive outlook for regional expansion.

The programme is almost fully subscribed and is still garnering interest, the firms said.

JustCo and its members benefit by being first-in-line adopters of new solutions and innovation developed from the JustCo Lab partnerships. Members can better identify potential business investment targets among these early-stage start-ups and contribute by being a mentor to the start-up ecosystem.

Separately, JustCo has launched an app to foster collaboration among its members.

Members can get "seamless" access to any centre, book resources, sign up for exclusive events, enjoy members-only perks, receive community news, and submit and track service requests.

Members can build their presence in the JustCo global network with personalised business profiles and match themselves with potential customers.

The overall Chinese market contracted by 9.7 per cent in last year's final quarter, but Apple declined at about twice that pace, research firm IDC said in a report yesterday. The company was ranked fourth by shipments in the country. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

iPhone shipments plunge in China as Huawei tightens grip: Report

BEIJING • Apple's Chinese smartphone shipments plummeted an estimated 20 per cent in last year's final quarter, underscoring the scale of the iPhone maker's retreat in the world's largest mobile device arena against local rivals like Huawei Technologies.

The overall Chinese market contracted by 9.7 per cent in the quarter, but Apple declined at about twice that pace, research firm IDC said in a report yesterday.

A slowing economy, lengthening replacement times and the iPhone's hefty price tag contributed to the US giant's decline in China, IDC said.

Xiaomi fared even worse in the final months of last year, when unit shipments plunged almost 35 per cent, the consultancy estimated.

Smartphone labels from Apple to Samsung Electronics are contending with a plateauing global market after years of breakneck growth, as a lack of industry innovation discourages consumers from replacing devices as often as they used to.

Apple also has to cope with the rise of Chinese rivals such as Huawei, which is eroding its share of a market once pivotal to driving its growth.

China's top electronics retailers slashed prices on the latest iPhones by as much as 20 per cent in past months – an unusual move that illustrated waning enthusiasm for Apple's gadgets.

Huawei shored up its lead after unit shipments soared 23.3 per cent, leading all major brands, according to IDC. That is despite grappling with an unusually turbulent few months during which its finance chief was arrested on allegations of bank fraud, and the United States marshalled its allies to try to block the company from selling next-generation networking equipment.

Apple was ranked fourth by shipments in the country during the period, following Oppo and Vivo, IDC said.

Fifth-ranked Xiaomi, a Chinese name that experienced rapid growth just before its 2018 initial public offering, incurred a 34.9 per cent plunge in shipments due to inventory corrections and an internal restructuring, IDC said.

"The domestic smartphone market environment in 2019 doesn't look very optimistic," IDC senior analyst Wang Xi said in the report.

IDC said: "5G phones will still comprise only a very small portion of the overall market. We have a long way to go before they become mainstream." BLOOMBERG

CompanyBriefs

Vicom

Vehicle inspection and testing group Vicom reported a 30.9 per cent jump in net earnings for the year ended Dec 31, 2018, and has declared bumper dividends.

The ComfortDelGro Group subsidiary posted earnings attributable to shareholders of $34.7 million after tax on a 3.1 per cent rise in revenue to $100.1 million.

Directors have recommended a final dividend of 23.17 cents and a special dividend of 8.62 cents. The corresponding dividend in the previous financial year was 22.88 cents.

Much of the bottom line growth was from a net gain on the surrender of lease of a property at 18 Teban Gardens Crescent, which netted $7.7 million. Operating costs crept up by 2.3 per cent to $68.1 million, with utilities and communications posting the biggest increase.

Vicom said: "Barring further drops in certificate of entitlement prices, the vehicle testing business is expected to remain stable."

"We will continue to look at introducing new services in the non-vehicle testing business to mitigate any drop in demand resulting from the slowing Singapore economy," it added.

Nutryfarm International

The Singapore Exchange (SGX) has rejected Nutryfarm International's 90 million yuan (S$18 million) acquisition of a 45 per cent stake in tech company First Linkage, over concerns about contractual workarounds to address foreign ownership restrictions.

In a regulatory filing released on Sunday, Nutryfarm said the market regulator highlighted considerations related to the significance of the business conducted through the workaround and the legality of the business or ownership structures used to comply with foreign ownership restrictions.

In March last year, Nutryfarm said it proposed to acquire First Linkage. First Linkage owns First Linkage HK, which in turns owns Beijing Zhonglian Shengtong Internet Technology. Zhonglian Shengtong provides exclusive technical and other services to the Shengyuantong Group, including education management consulting services, intellectual property licences, technical support and consulting services.

To comply with foreign ownership restrictions, Zhonglian Shengtong entered into certain "variable interest entity" agreements with the owners of Shengyuantong.

SGX cited a listing decision, which stated that a key concern with contractual arrangements that confer operational control and economic rights could expose issuers and minority shareholders to adverse impact if the authorities clamp down on those arrangements.

Interbank currency rates

Feb 11

Currencies	Against S$ Bid	Against S$ Offer	Against US$ Bid	Against US$ Offer
S$/US$ to one unit of foreign currency:				
Australian dollar	0.9629	0.9632	0.7097	0.7098
Canadian dollar	1.0216	1.0218	0.7530	0.7530
Euro	1.5354	1.5357	1.1316	1.1317
NZ dollar	0.9172	0.9179	0.6760	0.6764
Sterling pound	1.7518	1.7526	1.2911	1.2915
US dollar	1.3568	1.3570	-	-
S$/US$ to 100 units of foreign currency:				
Chinese renminbi	20.0168	20.0239	14.7530	14.7560
Danish kroner	20.5707	20.5768	15.1612	15.1635
Hong Kong dollar	17.29	17.29	12.7431	12.7439
Indian Rupee	1.91	1.91	1.4044	1.4046
Indonesia rupiah	0.0097	0.0097	0.0071	0.0071
Japanese yen	1.2333	1.2336	0.9090	0.9091
Korean won	0.1205	0.1208	0.0888	0.0890
Malaysian ringgit	33.34	33.38	24.5700	24.6002
New Taiwan dollar	4.3981	4.4030	3.2415	3.2446
Norwegian krone	15.6490	15.6585	11.5338	11.5391
Philippine peso	2.6042	2.6066	1.9194	1.9209
Saudi riyal	36.1784	36.1847	26.6645	26.6652
Swedish krona	14.6242	14.6310	10.7784	10.7819
Swiss franc	135.5309	135.6051	99.8901	99.9300
Thai Baht	4.3183	4.3203	3.1827	3.1837

Source: OCBC

Government securities

GOVERNMENT BONDS — Feb 11

Period	Issue code	Coupon rate (%)	Maturity	Close Bid	Day's High	Day's Low
2-Year	NY05100N	3.250%	01-Sep-20	101.93	101.94	101.94
5-Year	N519100A	2.000%	01-Feb-24	99.88	99.93	99.88
10-Year	NX18100A	2.625%	01-May-28	103.85	0.00	0.00
15-Year	NZ13100V	3.375%	01-Sep-33	111.85	112.40	112.40
20-Year	NZ16100X	2.250%	01-Aug-36	96.94	0.00	0.00
30-Year	NA16100H	2.750%	01-Mar-46	102.73	103.30	103.30

Note: Based on latest issue

Source: Monetary Authority of Singapore

MSCI INDICES

Feb 8	Index	In local curr % dy Change	In local curr % yr Change
World Preliminary	1537.5	-0.8	6.7
EAFE Preliminary	1059.9	-0.8	5.2
Europe Preliminary	1481.7	-0.6	5.5
Australia	1220.8	-0.4	7.0
Austria Preliminary	538.6	-1.1	8.1
Belgium Preliminary	992.1	-1.4	8.4
Canada Preliminary	1989.9	-0.9	8.7
Denmark Preliminary	7849.5	-0.7	6.0
Finland Preliminary	720.1	0.0	10.3
France Preliminary	1794.4	-0.6	4.7
Germany Preliminary	871.4	-1.2	3.3
Greece Preliminary	45.4	0.5	4.7
India	1274.6	-1.4	0.9
Indonesia	7392.3	-0.6	4.5
Ireland Preliminary	191.5	-0.2	6.8
Israel Preliminary	250.6	-0.1	8.6
Italy Preliminary	657.0	-0.6	5.6
Japan	921.2	-1.9	3.1
Korea	652.0	-1.7	7.9
Malaysia	586.4	-0.4	0.8
Netherlands Preliminary	1584.2	-0.7	8.7
New Zealand	140.1	0.8	5.6
Norway Preliminary	2869.5	-1.7	3.0
Pakistan	407.1	-1.5	14.1
Philippines	1368.0	-0.5	8.4
Portugal Preliminary	84.4	-1.9	4.5
Singapore	1667.7	0.0	4.6
Singapore Free	358.6	0.0	4.6

Source: MSCI

OBITUARIES

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1800-289-9988 or 6319-5192

1st Anniversary

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Psalm 23:1

In Loving Memory of Our Late Beloved Founder, Managing Director & Dear Friend

Major (Ret) Surajan s/o A. Gangadharan (P.B.)

Who left us to be with the Lord on February 12, 2018.

Sadly Missed and Fondly Remembered by
The Management & Staff of
Major's Pest Management Services Pte. Ltd.

CHIN KIAN HONG 陈健康
Age: 80
passed away peacefully on 10 February 2019.
Dearly missed and fondly remembered by loved ones.

Wife: Sim Suan Gee

Sons:
Chin Chee Woei
Chin Chee Boon

Daughters-in-law:
Lee Gek Lan
Wang Zhongli

Daughter:
Chin Woan Tyng

Grandsons:
Chin Ying Hao
Chin Ying Kai
Chin Yurui

Granddaughters:
Chin Ying En
Chin Ying Tong
Chin Yuxuan
Chin Yuyi

And all relatives and friends.

Body is resting at Blk 164 Punggol Central S'pore 820164 (Multi-Purpose Hall).
Cortege will leave on 14 February 2019 (Thursday) at 1pm for Mandai Crematorium Hall 2 for cremation at 1.40pm.

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He restores my soul." Psalm 23:1-3

5th ANNIVERSARY
In Ever Loving Memory of
Our Dearest Beloved Husband, Father and Grandfather

DR SIOW KON SANG
Called Home to be with the Lord, on 12 February 2014

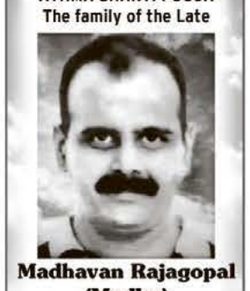
Dearly Cherished & Forever Remembered By Your Family

OM NAMA SHIVAYA

Janakiammal w/o Perumal
(Former Turf Club)
Age: 84
Passed away peacefully on 11 February 2019, dearly missed and remembered by loved ones.
Husband: Perumal (deceased)
Son & Daughter-in-law:
P. Rajakumar & M. Sarasvathi
Daughters & Sons-in-law:
P. Kalaiarasi & G. Durairaj
P. Rajakumari & G. Nadarajan
Grandchildren, all relatives and friends.
Amma is resting at Block 288D Jurong East Street 21 #07-422, Singapore 604288.
Cortege leaves on Tuesday 12 February 2019 at 4.00pm for Mandai Crematorium Hall 4 for cremation at 5.00pm.

KRISHNASAMY BALASEGARAN
Age: 63
passed away peacefully on 11 February 2019.
Dearly missed and fondly remembered by loved ones. Leaving behind beloved wife Poonkothai (Rama), sons Shantosh and Shanker, siblings, sisters-in-law, brothers-in law, relatives and friends.
Body is resting at Blk 534 Ang Mo Kio Ave 10 St 52 #02-2533 S(560534)
Cortege will leave on 12 Feb 2019 (Tuesday) at 5.30pm for Mandai Crematorium for cremation.

ॐ
ATHMA SHANTI POOJA
The family of the Late



Madhavan Rajagopal (Madhu)
(s/o late P.M. Rajagopal & late Leela Rajagopal)
Departed 30 January 2019
wish to express our heartfelt thanks & appreciation to all relatives, friends & colleagues. We are deeply touched by your kind attendance, condolences, donations and floral tributes during our recent bereavement.
Special thanks to all Doctors, Nurses & Staff of Ren Ci Community Hospital, Chronic Sick Ward Level 5.
The Athma Shanti Pooja will be held at Sri Sivan Temple, 24 Geylang East Avenue 2, S389752 on Thursday, 14 Feb 2019 at 7.15pm.
Please treat this as a personal invitation.

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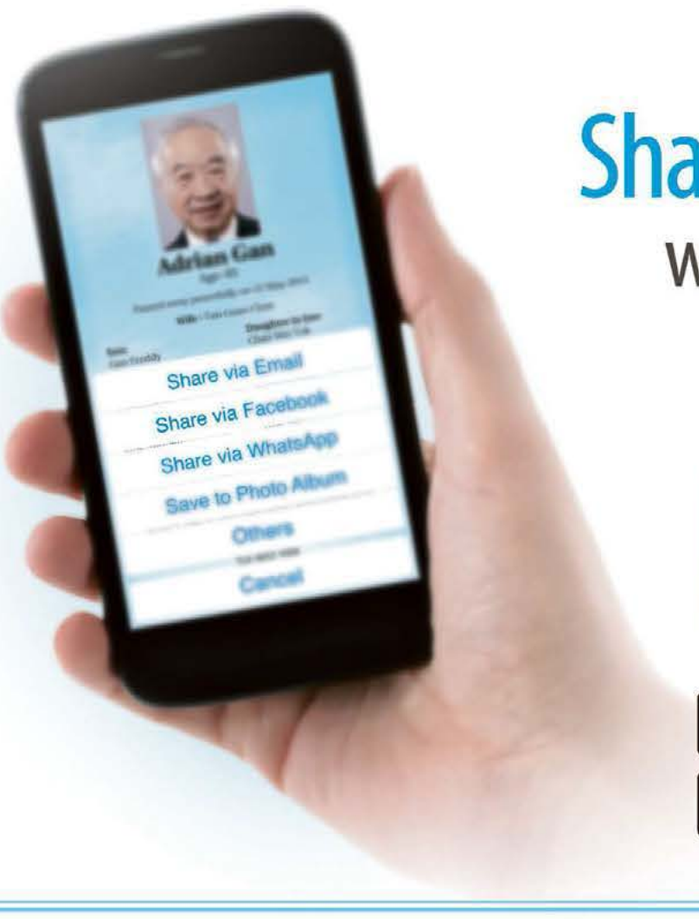

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UNITED WILL ATTACK PSG, VOWS SOLSKJAER

Interim boss confident his 'three good forwards' can challenge French side's defence in first leg

LONDON • Ole Gunnar Solskjaer further endeared himself to the Old Trafford faithful after confirming Manchester United would stay true to their attacking ethos and not sit back ahead of the first leg of their Champions League last-16 meeting against Paris Saint-Germain today.

British media reports have indicated that the interim manager will land the job on a permanent basis in the summer after engineering a run of 10 wins in their past 11 games since replacing the sacked Jose Mourinho in December.

But Solskjaer brushed off the speculation, which will surely hit fever pitch should the Red Devils get past a PSG side shorn of Neymar and Edinson Cavani – claiming there were still a "few more months for me to do whatever I can do for the club".

At his pre-match press conference yesterday, he was brimming with confidence as he declared: "If ever there was a time for us to play big games, it's now."

Asked if he had any inkling he would be in the dugout when the last-16 draw was made in December, he said: "Of course, I didn't know. I was watching it with my son Noah and said, 'Wow that is a tough challenge'. But we have given ourselves the best possible opportunity in the way we have gone into tomorrow's game.

"When Manchester United ring and ask you to help, you say yes. The Champions League is a fantastic tournament. It is a test for our whole team.

"I have loved every single minute of it. We knew we had a big challenge in front of us because we were far behind in the league, confidence was low after Liverpool, but they have responded fantastically.

"I don't think we could be in a better frame of mind and looking forward to the next few games.

"We are confident. We have found what team we have, we are looking like a team, and we are agreeing on how we should approach games."

France forward Anthony Martial, who sat alongside the manager, agreed it was "easier to play this style of football compared to (the) previous style we were asked to play" in a dig at Mourinho.

Solskjaer warned his opposite number Thomas Tuchel that when United "are on song, not many teams enjoy their nights at Old Trafford", he also revealed the plan to take the game to the opposition.

He added: "It's about always believing in yourself. If you asked other managers who played against Sir Alex (Ferguson's) teams, the pace and the tempo going forward were key.

"I have three good forwards (Marcus Rashford, Anthony Martial and Romelu Lukaku), as well as (Alexis) Sanchez and (Jesse) Lingard. They can challenge PSG's defence."

While his managerial record in domestic competitions with United stands up to scrutiny, this will be his first test against elite European competition.

But he remains far from cowed at playing under the floodlights.

Recalling how "the biggest nights of my career have been Champions League nights", the 45-year-old, who scored the winner in the 1999 final which helped the club secure the treble, said: "Both the supporters and players have been looking forward to a night like this because they have always been special."

Solskjaer also dismissed suggestions that a PSG side without Cavani, Neymar and Thomas Meunier would be there for the taking, insisting it made them "more unpredictable".

He added: "Any team that are missing players will feel the effect, but that will give the others the chance." REUTERS

MAN UNITED V PSG
Singtel TV Ch110 & StarHub Ch214, tomorrow, 3.55am

THE GOOD OLE UNITED WAY

It's about always believing in yourself. If you asked other managers who played against Sir Alex (Ferguson's) teams, the pace and the tempo going forward were key. I have three good forwards myself. They can challenge PSG's defence.

OLE GUNNAR SOLSKJAER, Manchester United interim manager, confident that his rejuvenated side can pose a real threat to Paris Saint-Germain in their Champions League last-16 clash.

Manchester United players go through the paces at the Aon Training Complex in Manchester yesterday as they prepare to take on Paris Saint-Germain in the first leg of the Champions League last-16 tie at Old Trafford today. PHOTO: REUTERS

Buffon calls on PSG to show 'spirit of sacrifice'

Angel di Maria, written off as a flop during his Manchester United stint, is looking to prove a point against his former club. PHOTO: REUTERS

PARIS • So much has changed since the Champions League last-16 draw was made in December. Paris Saint-Germain were flying, Manchester United were in free fall and British pundits feared for the worst.

But it is PSG, and not the Red Devils, who will go into today's first leg with a sense of trepidation after arriving at Old Trafford with a decimated squad.

Two of their front three, Neymar and Edinson Cavani, have been ruled out through injuries, along with defender Thomas Meunier.

Their absences have thrown Thomas Tuchel's preparations into disarray, with goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon calling on his teammates to show "more of a spirit of sacrifice" to make up for the drop in quality.

Lamenting their weakened state, he told CNN: "This is a problem for us. I'm not sure if it's a big problem or a little one.

"I hope it's only a small problem but... it's going to be heavy going."

He also told Sky Sports: "Football is strange. Two months ago, all the people thought that PSG would have passed the test easily. Seeing what has happened to us and the evolution at Manchester today, at least we are even."

While his comments do not bode well against an in-form United, who are on a roll after 10 wins in 11 games, PSG do have a star player champing at the bit to prove a point against his former club.

Written off as a £60 million (S$105 million) flop, Angel di Maria, who lasted just one season at United from 2014-15, will have a vital role to play for the visitors.

According to a tweet from Manchester Evening News writer Samuel Luckhurst, the Argentina forward will line up alongside Kylian Mbappe and Julian Draxler as Tuchel rejigs his attacking trio.

In a recent interview with radio station France Bleu, di Maria lifted the lid on his inability to settle in England, saying: "I only stayed one year. It wasn't the best period of my career, or they didn't let me have my best time there. But thanks to God, I was able to come to PSG and be myself again."

If the French champions are to overcome their injury woes and put themselves in a strong position before the March 6 return leg at the Parc des Princes, they will certainly need him at his best.

Tuchel revealed that he is counting on di Maria to show his true self on the pitch, something that the United faithful only witnessed fleetingly. He said: "He is a gift for me. Everything is very easy with him because he is a top professional. He has extraordinary quality and works so hard."

It was also not all doom and gloom for the German boss after it was revealed Marco Verratti had won his fitness race following three weeks out with an ankle injury.

The Italy midfielder, who travelled with the squad, said he felt good and was really happy. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

BACKS AGAINST THE WALL

This is a problem for us. I'm not sure if it's a big problem or a little one. I hope it's only a small problem but... It's going to be heavy going.

GIANLUIGI BUFFON, Paris Saint-Germain goalkeeper, on the front-line injury crisis his team face for their Champions League game against Manchester United today.

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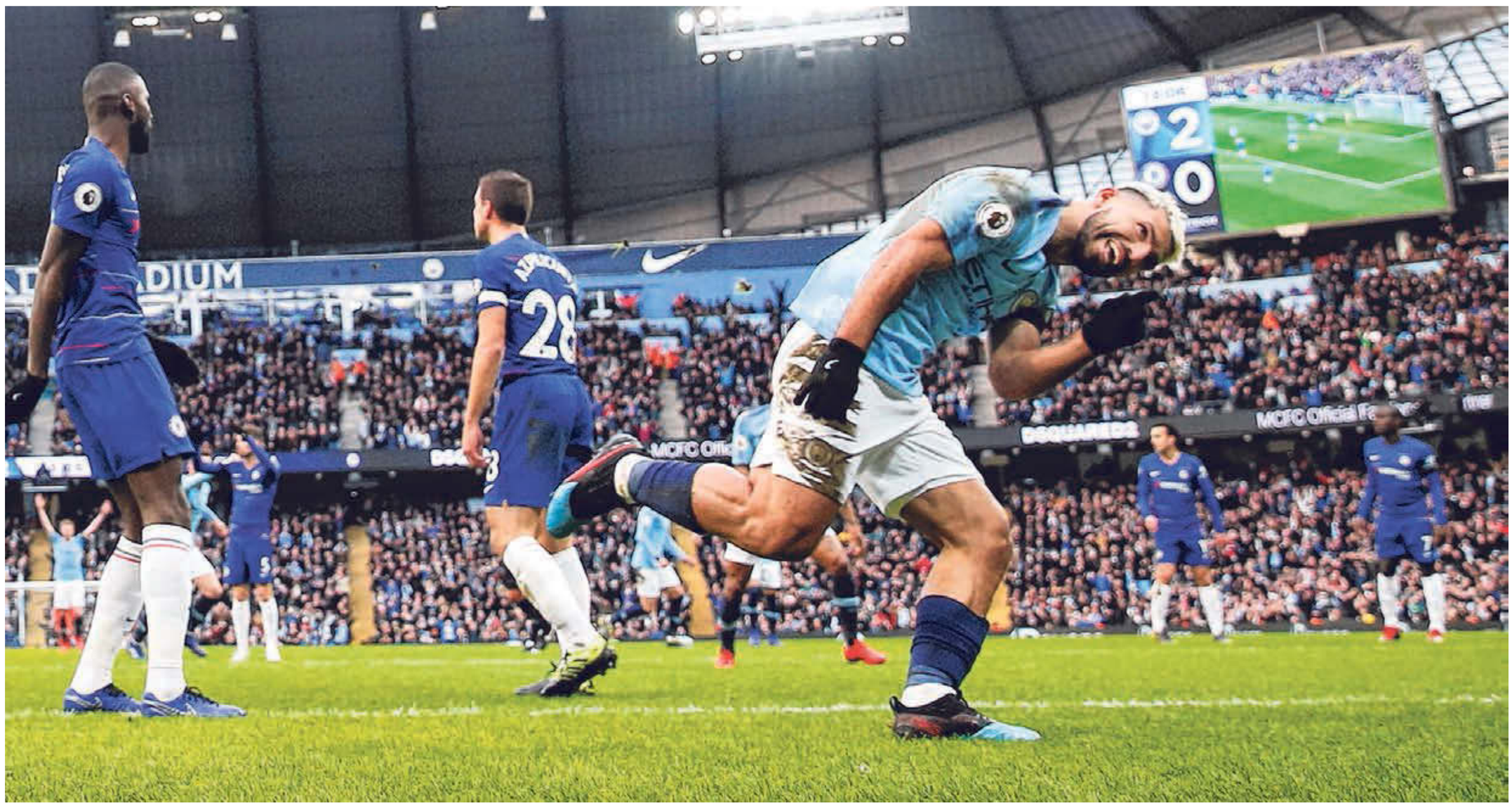


NO PATS ON BACKS FOR CITY AFTER ROUT: PEP

Spaniard wants players to 'maintain the level' in bid to emulate his all-conquering Barca side

'SUFFOCATE' FOR SUCCESS

We don't love each other too much, the players and the staff. We don't let them breathe, but it's the only way.

PEP GUARDIOLA, Manchester City manager, on the relentless pursuit of excellence required to keep fellow title contenders Liverpool and Tottenham at bay.

LONDON • Pep Guardiola's relentless pursuit of excellence means the bar always has to be set higher at Manchester City than at other clubs.

Part of the reason why he is so hard on his players also has to do with the fact City have won most of their honours over the past decade unlike Liverpool, whose "trophy room is much bigger than ours".

Despite rounding off an "incredible week" by smashing Chelsea 6-0 on Sunday to return to the top of the Premier League on goal difference, the City boss revealed there were no pats on the backs in the dressing room, with the most competitive title race in recent years.

He told reporters: "We don't love each other too much, the players and the staff. We don't let them breathe, but it's the only way.

"Nobody can say anything bad about us because these guys work a lot. The more you win games, the more you have to work.

"We have to maintain the level. We are competing with Tottenham and Liverpool. They've made the best starts in their history... so for us to still be there means a lot.

"To score six against Chelsea and the way we played, we had so much attention. We did it, it's an incredible compliment to the players, they are outstanding."

Guardiola also defended Maurizio Sarri, his Chelsea counterpart and close personal friend, after the Blues suffered their biggest defeat in 28 years, fuelling the sack rumours.

Urging patience and drawing parallels with his debut season at City, he added: "People don't understand how difficult the first year can be. My first season here was difficult. People think if you buy players, you can immediately come in and win, but you need time."

Chelsea were blown away by a double from Raheem Sterling and a Ilkay Gundogan strike, while Sergio Aguero equalled Alan Shearer's league record of 11 hat-tricks as he became the club's all-time top scorer in the top flight with 160 goals in 229 appearances.

But, as far as Guardiola is concerned, City can still reach another level or two. Having led Barcelona to three successive LaLiga titles and two Champions League trophies, the Spaniard issued a challenge to his side – to emulate the greatest team of the 2008-12 era.

He added: "We have won three titles since we are together, (but) in Barca, we won much more.

"That team won the Champions League, World Club Cups, six trophies in the first season.

"(But) the desire to want to do the best is incredible and similar. For us to get 100 points (in the league last season), break all records, (I must) continue to push them and push them."

And if City are to pull off an unprecedented quadruple this season – they remain the only English team capable of achieving the feat – Aguero will be key to their chances.

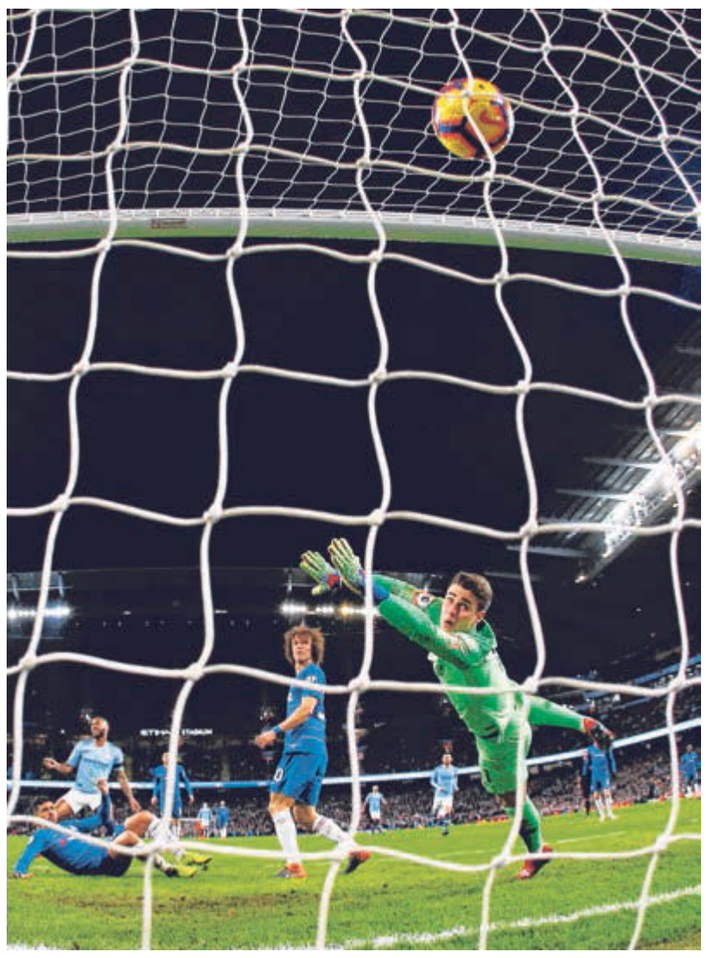
Having hailed his big-game mentality in the lead-up to the game, Guardiola later praised Aguero's "consistency", telling the BBC: "I have said many times, Sergio scores every single season a lot of goals.

"I admire these kind of players. Young players come, but some stay for a long time, that is fantastic."

Sterling agreed with his manager, claiming Aguero should be "cherished".

He told Sky Sports: "It was a terrific performance from the team – the manager set us up and got us ready for the game. Sergio is a player we depend on."

Asked how he felt about matching Shearer's mark, the Argentina striker, who prefers to do his talking on the pitch with unnerving accuracy, stayed true to fashion, insisting he had "to continue the same way". AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS, THE GUARDIAN



Top: Manchester City's Sergio Aguero celebrating the third goal, his second, against Chelsea at the Etihad on Sunday. He later scored a third goal to equal Alan Shearer's league record of 11 hat-tricks as he became the club's all-time top scorer in the top flight with 160 goals in 229 appearances.

Above: Raheem Sterling scoring his second of the night and City's sixth goal as the Blues suffered their biggest defeat in 28 years. PHOTOS: REUTERS

My job is always at risk, admits beleaguered Sarri

LONDON • Maurizio Sarri admitted that he does not know if Chelsea will sack him and said it was right that there should be scrutiny of his position following the 6-0 hiding at Manchester City on Sunday.

This was the Blues' biggest defeat since a 7-0 loss to Nottingham Forest in April 1991.

Asked if he feared losing his job, the manager said "I don't know" before admitting "my job is always at risk", a situation that is hardly likely to be helped by what he went on to say to Sky Sports Italia: "If the president (Roman Abramovich) calls, I'll be happy, seeing as I never hear from him. To be honest, I don't know what to expect."

The owner's record with managers suggests Sarri should not expect to be in charge for much longer, with further quotes attributed to the 60-year-old suggesting that he is unsure of how to transform the fortunes of a team who have dropped to sixth.

"Matches like this can leave a mark. It won't be easy to get back on our feet after this," Sarri said.

"Football is also made of heavy defeats. At half-time, I told the lads that if we were able to react, we'd come back stronger than ever."

Chelsea's run of three away league defeats saw them concede 12 goals, including four at Bournemouth and two at Arsenal, to pile the pressure on a manager whose insistence on adhering to his philosophy of possession football is frustrating the Chelsea fans.

The Italian remains unmoved, saying: "My target is to play my football, and not to change to other football (styles). Today I didn't see my football. At the beginning, it worked so now we need to understand the reason why at the moment it isn't working."

At the end of the match, he failed to shake Pep Guardiola's hand.

He said: "I didn't see him at that moment. Of course it's usual to shake. I'll go to say hello to him later. I've no problem with Pep."

Guardiola said: "I spoke with Gianfranco Zola (Sarri's assistant) and it's no problem. I have a good relationship with him." THE GUARDIAN

English Premier League talking points

1 HOSTILE WATFORD GIVE SILVA AN EARFUL

They say time is usually a great healer, but the memories of their former manager's acrimonious departure last year clearly still rankles with Watford fans, who were asked to request tribute songs for Marco Silva to be played before Saturday's win over Everton.

Al Wilson's The Snake and Since U Been Gone by Kelly Clarkson were among those chosen as the hosts created a hostile reception for the Portuguese on his return to Vicarage Road. It had the desired effect as Andre Gray's winner condemned Silva's men to defeat despite their striking the crossbar on two occasions and the beleaguered Toffees boss admitted there was a "lack of confidence" running through his side.

2 HONEYMOON OVER FOR SAINTS BOSS HASENHUTTL

The anger emanating from Southampton boss Ralph Hasenhuttl after Saturday's last-gasp 2-1 loss at home to fellow strugglers Cardiff was all the more understandable given what lies ahead.

The glow surrounding the Saints has quickly diminished after two wins in 10 matches since Christmas, and they now face a testing run of games, with Arsenal, Manchester United and Spurs to play in three of their next four matches.

While Southampton have scored in their past seven matches, they remain too predictable in attack, especially without the injured Danny Ings.

3 SETTLED DEFENCE PAYS DIVIDENDS FOR BURNLEY

Burnley's defence and goalkeeper proved to be the difference-maker as the fine margins of the top flight were exposed at the Amex Stadium after they defeated Brighton 3-1 on Saturday.

Since Tom Heaton has returned in goal, the Clarets' back five have looked more secure, with James Tarkowski and Ben Mee the heroes in front of their captain.

Mee may not be the tallest, the quickest or the most cultured defender around, but he has offered consistency for years. THE GUARDIAN

PLANS IN PLACE FOR ATHLETES POST-SPORT

SPEXBUSINESS IN NUMBERS

230

Former and current Team Singapore athletes have benefited.

60

Companies across more than 25 industries that provide career opportunities to Team Singapore athletes.

SpexBusiness Network is one but MCCY Minister urges corporates, NSAs to do more

Wang Meng Meng

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu has called for greater corporate support to help national athletes in their transition from their competitive sports careers into the workforce.

She said this yesterday in a written reply to a question tabled by Nominated Member of Parliament Yip Pin Xiu.

National para swimmer Yip had asked if the ministry will consider providing more support to athletes who are about to retire from sports.

Ms Fu gave the assurance that the Government has put in place plans to support athletes beyond their sporting careers, and corporates have also played their part, but more can be done.

She said: "The spexBusiness Network currently comprises 60 companies across more than 25 industries to provide a wide array of career opportunities to our Team Singapore athletes.

"Since 2013, 230 former and current Team Singapore athletes have benefitted from the spexBusiness (Network), including former shuttler Derek Wong who took on a full-time position at Deloitte, former sprinter Calvin Kang who started a sports-related business, and para swimmer Sophie Soon who is now on a flexi-work arrangement with Toyota Asia, following her internship at (national sports agency) Sport Singapore.

"Many corporates have stepped forward to support our athletes, and we hope to see more doing so."

The spexBusiness Network, managed by the Singapore Sports Institute, was created in 2013 and started with seven companies. It has grown to include sportswear company adidas, hospitality brand Banyan Tree, the Building and Construction Authority, car distributor Borneo Motors, consultancy firm Deloitte Singapore and OCBC Bank.

Derek Wong, the former Singapore badminton player and Olympian, is employed full-time at consultancy firm Deloitte Singapore. ST FILE PHOTO

Ms Fu also urged national sports associations (NSAs) to follow the example of the Singapore Table Tennis Association "which has bursaries and arrangements with institutes of higher learning to support their athletes to transition to a post-sport career".

She said: "I would like to encourage more NSAs to support their athletes in this regard."

Professor Fatimah Lateef, an MP for Marine Parade GRC, also asked Minister Fu if there will be a renewal of the ActiveSG credits once they have been completely utilised and whether there will be changes to the terms and conditions of use if the credits are renewed.

Ms Fu said in a written reply: "Currently, we have no plans to renew the credits for members who have utilised them fully, but we are regularly looking for ways to encourage Singaporeans to adopt a more active lifestyle."

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Golden State Warriors forward Kevin Durant taking a shot while closely guarded by Miami Heat centre Bam Adebayo during their National Basketball Association game at the Oracle Arena in Oakland on Sunday. The Warriors recovered from a 19-point first-quarter deficit to eke out a 120-118 win. PHOTO: REUTERS

Warriors withstand the Heat to edge close contest

OAKLAND • The Golden State Warriors showed the mettle of champions by "withstanding the storm" after Miami brought the heat to the Oracle Arena on Sunday.

Steve Kerr's players had foreseen "it was going to be a game" with the Heat being the only team in the league to boast of a winning record on the road (14-13) despite having a losing record at home (11-16).

And so it nearly proved as Miami got off to a hot start, building a 19-point first-quarter lead against the two-time defending National Basketball Association champions.

While Golden State regained control, fuelled by a 12-0 scoring run early in the third quarter, the visitors looked to be in the ascendancy after going ahead 118-115 with 51.5 seconds left following back-to-back steals and baskets from Josh Richardson and Dwyane Wade.

But, in Kevin Durant, the Warriors have a bona fide clutch player, even if it was not exactly his night from beyond the arc.

The 10-time All-Star came to the rescue by sinking his first three-pointer of the contest, after six misses, to tie the game and DeMarcus Cousins then made his two free throws to seal the 120-118 victory.

"They came out and played hard on both ends of the court," said Durant, who led all scorers with 39 points on 16-of-24 shooting in the Warriors' 15th win in 16 games.

"But I like how we kept fighting. We were just locked in, playing our brand. We moved the ball, we made shots after a while, it took us a while to wake up on Sunday."

Josh Richardson paced the Heat with 37 points, while Wade, in his last regular-season game in the Bay Area, added 10 off the bench, two days after a bad fall in Sacramento had left him with a bruised back.

While the 37-year-old will retire at the end of the season, his tenacity remains a hallmark, with Heat coach Erik Spoelstra hailing him as being "built like Captain America".

It was also fitting that the veteran guard received a video tribute during the match-up, which he called "amazing" and "dope".

Separately, Magic Johnson, president of basketball operations for the Los Angeles Lakers, on Sunday accused the New Orleans Pelicans of leading them on regarding Anthony Davis.

They had talks with the Pelicans regarding a deal for the big man, but could not strike a deal before last Thursday's trade deadline.

Asked if he thought the Pelicans negotiated in good faith, Johnson said: "No. We knew that basically at the end of the day what happened happened. And we knew that when we first started. In terms of what happened, hey, it is what it is."

The Lakers were left wondering what could have been as Joel Embiid showed the benefits of having an All-Star centre as he scored 37 points and grabbed 14 rebounds to power the Philadelphia 76ers over the visitors 143-120.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

Lee aims to defend Malaysia Open title in April

KUALA LUMPUR • Five months after Malaysian badminton officials announced that Lee Chong Wei had been diagnosed with early-stage nose cancer, the shuttler stated he was aiming to return to competitive action by April, in time to defend his Malaysia Open title.

Speaking after a training session yesterday, the badminton great revealed he would gradually intensify his training regimen in preparation for the tournament, but would wait for his doctor's approval before resuming full training.

Lee has not played since his semi-final exit at the Indonesian Open last July but, after undergoing 33 sessions of proton therapy treatment in Taiwan, followed by a period of rehabilitation, he is close to returning to "normal fitness".

The 36-year-old said: "So far, I'm okay on court and at the gym. What is important is to build muscle and my feeling on court. So far, everything is okay, maybe in one or two weeks, I'll be back.

"That is important for me now. I spent one hour and 15 minutes on court and another hour in the gym. Now I will rest and be back on Wednesday.

"I must push myself slowly and, when the doctor gives me the green light, I will do my full training."

The former world No. 1 has mainly focused on his conditioning, doing gym work three times a week, but the Badminton Association of Malaysia (BAM) is ready to facilitate his desire for a step-up in intensity.

BAM coaching director Wong Choong Hann told reporters: "Chong Wei will try his best to follow the daily training routine.

"He has not followed a programme 100 per cent yet, but he understands his body and recovery rate better than any of us.

"He is like his own coach, so we'll give him space."

Adding that the training intensity would be tailored to Lee's progress and would include time at the gym, court practice and skill workouts, he said: "All of us, including Chong Wei, are hoping to follow the complete training programme, but we must assess the situation from time to time."

Wong also confirmed the BAM would submit Lee for the Malaysia Open before the entry list closes, but whether the 12-time winner gets to play in the event is subject to his doctor's permission. XINHUA

LOTTERY

TOTO Mon, 11 Feb 2019 Draw No. 3448/2019

Group 1 Prize $1,516,866

Winning Numbers						Add. No.
09	10	15	33	39	40	41

Prize Group	Share Amount	No. of Winning Shares
Group 1	$1,516,866	1
Group 2	$79,836	4
Group 3	$1,943	113
Group 4	$382	314
Group 5	$50	6,884
Group 6	$25	8,052
Group 7	$10	127,759

Group 1 prize and total share amount for Group 1 may differ due to rounding.

Next Draw Thu, 14 Feb 2019, 6.30pm Draw No. 3449/2019

Group 1 Prize **$1,000,000** est.

Draw Venue: Singapore Pools (Private) Limited, 210 Middle Road, #01-01, Singapore 188994

SPORTS FIXTURES HIGHLIGHTS

Event	Home	Away	Timing	Venue
Wed, 13 Feb 2019				
UE Europe	Fenerbahce	St Petersburg	1.55am	LW*
UE Champions	Roma	Porto	4.00am	LW*
UE Champions	Manchester Utd	Paris SG	4.00am	LW*

LW* : Telecast not available at Livewire(Singapore Pools)
Visit singaporepools.com for the latest 'Live' telecast listing.

No person under the age of 18 years shall be allowed to purchase a ticket or to claim any prize.
LW: Livewire (MBS) & Livewire (RWS) (21 years and above)
Livewire (Singapore Pools) (21 years and above during 'Live' telecast)
SB: SportsBuzz@Kranji (21 years and above)
Singapore Pools Account Service. Call 6786 6688 for more details.

PLAY RESPONSIBLY
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SPORT

S'PORE 7s SCORES SECOND PLACE

Last year's tourney improves by seven spots in World Rugby's appraisal; rated Asia's best

David Lee

The HSBC Singapore Rugby Sevens was ranked second out of 10 legs of the World Rugby Sevens series, and Asia's best last season, according to World Rugby's tournament evaluation.

With a score of 89.8, it made a mammoth leap from ninth place in the 2015-16 and 2016-17 seasons, and finished just 0.2 behind Vancouver, Canada.

Cape Town (South Africa) was third, Hamilton (New Zealand) was fourth and Hong Kong fifth.

Singapore Rugby Union (SRU) president Terence Khoo told The Straits Times that this was an unprecedented improvement in the history of the series as the Singapore Sevens was awarded the most improved event by World Rugby.

He said: "Our task was to put the Singapore Sevens back on track to be one of the leading lights of the series. We centred our event on family fun, which differentiated Singapore from the other venues.

"There were many areas of improvement as we dug deep and devoted manpower and resources into running the event to ensure the player and team experience were better than before.

"For us to go one-up on Hong Kong is a great achievement, and we were very close to becoming No. 1."

There are nine categories in the World Rugby assessment and Singapore Sevens emerged for accommodation and general support services. It also finished in the top three for training facilities and travel, which include land and air transfers.

Rugby Singapore chairman David Lim shared how the creation of a players' village at the OCBC Arena helped them score well in the general support services category.

He said: "We set up areas where players could rest and relax, have their meals or physiotherapy and they really enjoyed it.

"To have an event like this, and run it well, will help to motivate and inspire the next generation of rugby players and grow interest in the sport as Singaporeans get to watch world-class athletes up close."

The enthralling battles on the pitch also scored well with fans at the National Stadium, especially Fiji's 28-22 upset win over Australia in the final last year.

In 2018, the event was watched by over 55,000 fans and it has attracted some 140,000 fans over the last three years. This year's edition will be held on April 13-14.

Meanwhile, the SRU has successfully renewed its Institution of Public Character (IPC) status which expired last August.

Lim, who is also an SRU vice-president, said: "The expiry coincided with a regular scheduled internal audit with Sport Singapore.

"Issues were flagged and corrected. Once we showed we made the appropriate adjustments, our IPC status was renewed after a review earlier this month."

davidlee@sph.com.sg

• Tickets are available at www.singapore7s.sg

Boxer Muhamad Ridhwan says he looks at shoulders, gloves, in fact everything especially the feet, so that he can gauge what range his opponent can strike from. ST FILE PHOTO

SportingLife

If the eyes are key to sport, why don't athletes train them?

Rohit Brijnath

Assistant Sports Editor

In the showers, later, after that World Cup goal, the 1986 one, where Maradona creates mayhem over 62 metres to leave England baffled and football dazed, even Jorge Valdano is stunned.

Even he, the Argentinian who plays with Maradona, practises with Maradona, can't believe Maradona.

He can't believe that as Maradona dodged, wriggled, darted, danced on his magical way to goal that he still had time to see Valdano on the side asking for the ball and thus distracting England's Terry Fenwick.

"Just stop it," says Valdano. "There's no way you saw all that: it's not possible." But in his book, Touched By God, Maradona swears that he did. "And I swear that seeing it helped me."

I believe Maradona because athletes see, sense, know, note, register stuff that we can't imagine. Cricketers have a precise map of where fielders are positioned in their head and footballers – like Manchester City on Sunday night – can resemble fast-moving cartographers who glance at the terrain and then draw new routes to send down passes.

The finest passers, like Xavi in an older time, aren't human but more like chameleons, who have eyes which can track two different objects at the same time and have a 360 degree arc of vision.

In sport we focus on hands and feet and marvel at lungs and muscle, but it's the eyes which are the unsung weapons. One day we'll be able to attach a microscopic camera inside the eye which is the only way we'll understand what cues Novak Djokovic is reading which allows him to perfectly return a 206kmh serve. To watch him is to not believe our eyes.

Sport is about chemistry, physics, biology, history but also geography. A visual study of places and spaces. The game can't be played well unless it is seen quickly and read wisely. As Wayne Gretzky famously put it: "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been."

In her masterful book, When The Game Was Ours, Jackie MacMullan recounts an early meeting between Larry Bird and Magic Johnson in the same college All-Stars team. Think of it as a clairvoyants' convention. Bird sent a behind-the-back pass that landed "directly on Magic's right palm" and Magic responded by slinging it "back over his shoulder with a no-look feed to Bird".

These men were anticipating where the other would be, they had the ability to look quickly, read, scan, interpret. Everyone needs to see a picture of the play. Even runners. When the 400m hurdler, Dipna Lim-Prasad, was in Lane 8 – up ahead of everyone, unable initially to see her rivals – in her Asian Games final last year, she confesses: "It threw me off."

When they can, sometimes athletes take an obvious good look, as Chad le Clos did in the 200m butterfly final at the 2016 Olympics, turning his neck in presumed dismay as Michael Phelps switched on his extra propeller and accelerated. Other times it's more subtle, like in tennis doubles, where players must hit a ball and yet still be aware whether a rival at the net is moving for real or taunting them with a fake.

Boxers know about this high-speed calculation, for in the ring they're dancing and glancing. "The more experienced you are," says Muhamad Ridhwan, "the better you can read the opponent's rhythm, habit and capitalise on them.

"I don't only look at their shoulders or gloves. I look at everything especially his feet. From there I can see his range and I know what range he is most likely to throw punches."

Sport is about chemistry, physics, biology, history but also geography. A visual study of places and spaces. The game can't be played well unless it is seen quickly and read wisely.

The irony, of course, is that while athletes visit psychologists, calm the brain, sit in ice baths, restore their bodies, haul iron, burn off fat, they very rarely work on their eyes. But when they do, it often helps.

About five years ago, bowler New Hui Fen strapped on glasses with cameras on them so that biomechanists could film her eye movements. Where was she looking during her set-up? For how long? Was her focus wavering? Video was scrutinised, feedback was given, a routine was tinkered with and she practised rigorously. Eventually her accuracy improved.

Other athletes, across the world, swear by Dr Sherylle Calder, who has an aptly titled EyeGym. The South African, who has worked with World Cup-winning rugby teams and F1 driver Valtteri Bottas, has a Muhammad Ali quote pinned on her Twitter account: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. The hands can't hit what the eyes can't see."

Calder's website states that she has programmes which could develop a variety of skills for athletes, whether it's timing an interception, tracking fast objects or identifying the best decision amid distractions.

Athletes should go and take a peek. After all, in a sporting planet in search of an edge, of 1 per cent improvements, to ignore this is to show a lack of vision.

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SportsWorld

FAS referees to wear Warrix attire

The Football Association of Singapore (FAS) and Warrix Sport inked a deal yesterday to provide attire for referees for FAS-sanctioned domestic matches till 2021.

This applies to all FAS-registered referees, from the Singapore Premier League to Class 3 match officials. FAS referee assessors and instructors will also wear Warrix-branded attire during official duty.

Scholes to manage boyhood club Oldham

LONDON • Former Manchester United and England midfielder Paul Scholes has been appointed as manager of Oldham Athletic, the English fourth-tier football club announced yesterday.

Scholes, 44, is taking on his first managerial role, signing a contract with the club he supported as a boy. Oldham are 14th in League Two. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Barca draw gives Real hope in title race

BILBAO • LaLiga leaders Barcelona handed Real Madrid more hope in the title race as they drew 0-0 at Athletic Bilbao on Sunday, only avoiding defeat thanks to some outstanding saves by German goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Barca are top with 51 points, six ahead of Real. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Barty leads Australia past US in Fed Cup

MELBOURNE • Australia's world No. 13 Ashleigh Barty won all three of her Fed Cup ties to send the United States crashing out of the tennis team tournament on Sunday.

The Australian Open quarter-finalist beat Madison Keys and Sofia Kenin in the singles before teaming up with Priscilla Hon in the doubles to seal a 3-2 win in Asheville, North Carolina.

Australia will meet Belarus, who downed Germany 3-0, in the semi-finals in April. Romania, who stunned defending champions Czech Republic 3-2, will face France in the other last-four clash. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Next 48 Hours

TODAY

FOOTBALL

Uefa Champions League Last 16, 1st leg: Man United v PSG (Singtel TV Ch110 & StarHub Ch214), Roma v Porto (Ch112 & Ch213) – tomorrow, 3.55am.

Uefa Europa League Last 32, 1st leg: Fenerbahce v Zenit (Ch110 & Ch214, tomorrow, 1.50am).

TENNIS

ATP Rotterdam Open Day 2: Session 1 (6pm) & 2 (tomorrow, 2.30am) – StarHub Ch201.

TOMORROW

BASKETBALL

ABL HK Eastern v Alab Pilipinas (StarHub Ch202, 8pm).

FOOTBALL

Uefa Champions League Last 16, 1st leg: Tottenham v Dortmund (Singtel TV Ch110 & StarHub Ch214), Ajax v Real (Ch112 & Ch213) – Thursday, 3.55am.

TENNIS

ATP Rotterdam Open Day 3: Session 1 (6pm) & 2 (Thursday, 2.30am) – StarHub Ch201.

For latest updates, go to singteltv.com.sg & starhubgo.com or check the on-screen TV guide.

life

D

MATILDA THE MUSICAL
Singaporean girl in title role
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Jessica Shen, 45

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Girl Power

Female artists ruled the 61st Grammy Awards. Singers Kacey Musgraves and Dua Lipa picked up major awards and former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama spoke about the power of music. D2&3

(From far left) Lady Gaga, Jada Pinkett Smith, Alicia Keys, Mrs Michelle Obama and Jennifer Lopez at the 61st Grammy Awards.

DESIGN: SALLY LAM PHOTOS: REUTERS, JASMINE CHOONG

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IT'S LADIES' NIGHT AT THE GRAMMYS

British-Albanian pop star Dua Lipa wins Best New Artist and Best Dance Recording (Electricity). PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, EPA-EFE, REUTERS

(Left) American singer H.E.R. bags Best R&B Performance and Best R&B Album.

(Right) American country singer Kacey Musgraves picks up Album Of The Year, Best Country Solo Performance, Best Country Song and Best Country Album.

Singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile (left, with her wife, actress Catherine Shepherd), takes home three awards including Best American Roots Performance.

Female artists led the night, with Kacey Musgraves, Dua Lipa, Lady Gaga and others bagging multiple wins after last year's snub

Eddino Abdul Hadi
Music Correspondent

Under fire in recent times for under-representation, this year's edition of the Grammys felt like music's biggest night correcting itself.

Women ruled the 61st edition of the glitzy annual awards show that took place in Los Angeles yesterday, led by American country singer Kacey Musgraves, who picked up one of the biggest prizes, Album Of The Year, for her fourth album, Golden Hour.

For the first time, the nominations in the category were increased from five to eight – five of them female artists. This was a huge contrast to last year, when only one female artist was nominated, New Zealand singer Lorde.

Musgraves, 30, also led the winners' list by picking up three other prizes – Best Country Solo Performance for Butterflies, Best Country Song for Space Cowboy and Best Country Album for Golden Hour. It was her best performance at the Grammys yet – she also won Best Country Song (Merry Go 'Round) and Best Country Album (Same Trailer Different Park) at the show's 2013 edition.

Pop favourite Lady Gaga and American country singer Brandi Carlile each went home with three gongs, with Gaga, 32, picking up Best Pop Duo/Group Performance and Best Song Written For Visual Media for Shallow, which was featured on the soundtrack of the film A Star Is Born (2018).

Other prominent wins by female artists include British-Albanian pop star Dua Lipa for Best New Artist and Best Dance Recording (Electricity), American singer H.E.R. for Best R&B Performance (Best Part) and Best R&B Album (H.E.R.), Cardi B for Best Rap Album (Invasion Of Privacy), Ariana Grande, whose refused to attend after disagreements with the Grammys over her performance, picked up Best Pop Vocal Album for Sweetener.

Singer and songwriter Alicia Keys, a 15-time Grammy winner, was a gracious host and surprised many when she invited her powerful posse of friends on stage – former United States first lady Michelle Obama and actress-singers Jennifer Lopez, Gaga and Jada Pinkett Smith.

Mrs Obama said to the crowd: "Whether we like country or rap or rock, music helps us share ourselves – our dignity and sorrows, our hopes and joys. It allows us to hear one another, to invite one another in.

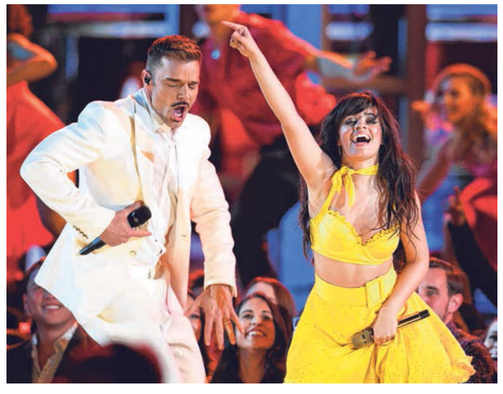
"Music shows us that all of it matters, every story within every voice, every note within every song – is that right ladies?"

It would seem that this year's Grammys was a direct response to last year's debacle.

It was only a year ago when Lorde, 22, became the only major nominee not to be invited to perform, and even more damning – there were no female nominees for Record Of The Year.

Grammys president Neil Portnow made the situation worse by saying that women needed "to step up", prompting an outcry from many in the music industry, who accused him of being condescending.

Mr Portnow apologised and his Recording Academy formed a task force to aid "female advancement", which has led to this year's turnaround.



(Above) K-pop juggernauts BTS are the first South Korean act to present an award at the Grammys, while pop singer Camila Cabello (left, with singer Ricky Martin) makes history as the first Latin act to open the Grammys.

In terms of increasing diversity at this year's ceremony, there were also plenty of firsts.

Rapper-actor Childish Gambino, whose real name is Donald Glover, made history with This Is America, his blistering rap on race relations. For the first time, a hip-hop song picked up Record Of The Year and Song Of The Year. The song also won Glover, 35, who did not attend the ceremony. Best Rap/Sung Performance and Best Music Video.

Pop singer Camila Cabello lost out on two nominations, but the 21-year-old made history, becoming the first Latin act to open the Grammys with a performance that also featured cameos from other prominent Latino artists – J Balvin, Ricky Martin and Arturo Sandoval.

Closer to home, K-pop juggernauts BTS became the first South Korean act to present an award (for Best R&B Album) and to be nominated for a prize. Their Love Yourself: Tear album was nominated for Best Recording Package, although they lost to St Vincent's Masseduction.

Perhaps this might be a start for more K-pop artists to shine and even win prizes at the Grammys. After all, the K-pop fan base is growing internationally, including in the US, and it would be prudent for the Grammys to give more prominence to the genre if it is to maintain its stature as "music's biggest night".

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Major winners

Album Of The Year: Golden Hour (Kacey Musgraves)
Record Of The Year: This Is America (Childish Gambino)
Best New Artist: Dua Lipa
Best Rap Album: Invasion Of Privacy (Cardi B)
Best R&B Album: H.E.R. (H.E.R.)
Best Rap Song: God's Plan (Drake)
Best Country Album: Golden Hour (Kacey Musgraves)
Song Of The Year: This Is America (Childish Gambino)
Best Pop Duo/Group Performance: Shallow (Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper)
Best Pop Solo Performance: Joanne (Where Do You Think You're Goin'?) (Lady Gaga)
Best Pop Vocal Album: Sweetener (Ariana Grande)
Best Dance/Electronic Album: Woman Worldwide (Justice)
Best Rock Album: From The Fires (Greta Van Fleet)

Bold fashion choices

Cardi B once again made a great fanfare with her rendition of her 2018 hit Money. True to its lyrics – "I was born to flex / (Yeu) Diamonds on my neck" – the rapper, 26, sparkled at the show.

Will this photo of the outfit worn by Joy Villa be pinned on the wall of fame or shame? The 27-year-old singer walked the red carpet as United States President Donald Trump's controversial border wall, complete with barbed wire on her shoulders, a spiked headpiece and a Make America Great Again (one of his campaign slogans) purse.

Lady Gaga (far right, with singer Jennifer Lopez), recalling how she ignored naysayers, said: "They said I was weird, that my look, my choices, my sound, that it wouldn't work. But music told me not to listen to them." The 32-year-old nabbed Best Pop Duo/Group Performance for Shallow with actor Bradley Cooper.

Who gets some credit for Fantastic Negrito's Please Don't Be Dead winning Best Contemporary Blues Album? The Community Bank of the Bay in Oakland, California, "because I have bad credit and they loaned me some money", the 51-year-old said in his acceptance speech.

Leon Bridges, 29, who picked up Best Traditional R&B Performance, wore his heart on his sleeve and everywhere else in this mustard corduroy outfit. It stood out with drawings that celebrated his home state of Texas and his music, with the name of his most recent album, Good Thing, marked in bold letters on his trousers' leg.

If Hector Buitrago (right) and Andrea Echeverri (far right) of Colombian rock band Aterciopelados took a taxi to the show, the driver would have no trouble guessing where the duo were heading to. Echeverri wore a gold-and-black outfit that resembled a Grammy statuette. The band were up for Best Latin Rock, Urban Or Alternative Album for Claroscura.

Matilda The Musical

Children's classic with big themes

Composer-comedian Tim Minchin, who is behind the songs for the Matilda musical, says adults will be able to identify with the work too

Toh Wen Li and Desiree Loh

A heartwarming musical about a spunky young girl is not the type of project one would typically associate with Australian composer-comedian Tim Minchin – known for his raunchy comedy and acerbic wit.

Indeed, Minchin himself admits the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) took a risk when it commissioned him in 2009 to write the songs and lyrics for Matilda The Musical, based on Roald Dahl's beloved children's book.

But it was a good risk, he says in a telephone interview from Sydney.

"The reason Dahl is so well-loved is because he has this dark, funny and slightly anarchic and iconoclastic tone. The reason the musical's done so well, I think, is because Dennis and I have managed to not ruin it, you know? We've managed to capture something of that tone," says Minchin, 43, referring to Dennis Kelly, who wrote the stage adaptation.

Kelly, too, is known more for his adult-themed works.

The award-winning musical will make its Singapore debut on Feb 21 and will run until March 17 at Marina Bay Sands, after a run in the South African cities Johannesburg and Cape Town last year.

The story centres on Matilda, a precocious five-year-old who loves to read. Her parents are obsessed with television and her headmistress is a bullying, child-tossing tyrant.

Matilda later discovers that she has the power of telekinesis – the ability to move objects with her mind – and, with the help of her kindly teacher, succeeds in standing up to the big bully.

The production, whose set and costumes were designed by Rob Howell, features massive swings, classroom desks that rise through trapdoors and alphabet blocks spelling hidden words.

"It's magical. It's a world we can relate to, but it's also not the world we live in – thank god," says resident director Natalie Gilhome. The show will be the same as the ones in West End and Broadway, she adds, save for behind-the-scenes tweaks to the set to make it easier to transport.

The songs in Matilda The Musical (above) are by Australian composer-comedian Tim Minchin (left). PHOTOS: KEVIN PATRICK ROBBINS, MATILDA THE MUSICAL INTERNATIONAL TOUR

While Dahl's book is a children's classic, the stage adaptation is more complicated because it was written for everyone, adds Minchin. "There are jokes and subtexts that only adults will notice."

The song When I Grow Up, for example, is a song of hope to children because the young cast members sing about waking up with the sun and climbing tall trees when they are bigger.

But for adults, it is a song tinged with regret and wistfulness.

"It's about how hard it is as an adult and how we forget about what we cared about when we were kids," says Minchin.

"What you know when you're grown up is that when you're bigger, you stop climbing trees.".

The bullying headmistress of Crunchem Hall Elementary, Miss Trunchbull, is played by 26-year-old South African actor Ryan de Villiers, who spends about 1½ hours before each show putting on layers of make-up, a wig held in place with "a hundred hairpins", fake moles and a fat suit.

Miss Trunchbull, he suggests, has similarities with leaders on the world stage, such as United States President Donald Trump.

"Presidents and politicians tend to be so stubborn and so caught up with their way. That's like Trunchbull. She thinks she knows what's right, and that's what she sticks to her whole life and that's how she messes everyone up."

Minchin, however, feels Matilda's mother, Mrs Wormwood, is the "Donald Trump of the musical".

"In the song Loud, she sings about how being loud is the most important thing and it doesn't matter what your ideas are as long as you present them loudly," says Minchin.

The musical's enduring themes are one of the reasons it has enjoyed such long-running success, he adds.

"It's about standing up for what's right and making sure you care for one another."

He adds that it is also about intellectualism because Matilda's superpower is really her knowledge.

Since its premiere at the RSC's The Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in November 2010, the musical has played in the West End, Broadway and countries such as the Philippines and Australia.

"It's really amazing for me as a sort of slightly rude comedian from Perth to have this thing in places like Singapore, South Korea, South Africa and in schools in America and Norway," says Minchin.

"This lovely and big-hearted show is still going on, and it's really great."

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Singaporean is one of four actresses playing Matilda

Toh Wen Li

Singaporean Sofia Poston will take centre stage in Matilda The Musical, the story of a smart, plucky girl who loves to read.

The nine-year-old pupil at United World College of South East Asia is one of four young actresses playing Matilda in the award-winning musical – inspired by Roald Dahl's story of the same name – which makes its Singapore debut on Feb 21.

Landing the lead role happened by chance. She was spotted by Matilda's creative team when she took on a small role in the musical Evita, which ran in Singapore last year. It asked her to submit recordings of herself performing songs from the musical – and not long after, she was offered the role.

"I know the feeling of having a big audience watching me. It's fun and nerve-racking at the same time," says Sofia, with a nod to her experience performing in Evita.

She was speaking to The Straits Times after eight weeks of rehearsals in Cape Town where Matilda last ran.

"I got very nervous (before the first rehearsal of Matilda), but I told myself I should believe in myself and do the best I can do... Grandma said, imagine everybody in the audience is sitting on the toilet."

The other three girls who will play Matilda on different days are South Africans Lilla Fleischmann, 14, Morgan Santo, 11, and Kitty Harris, 10.

Sofia's dream of performing on stage began when she saw Annie the musical at the age of five.

She started going for classes at the Centre Stage School of the Arts and joined the Singapore Symphony Children's Choir.

Like Matilda, Sofia loves to read and some of her favourite books are Dahl's Matilda, Frances Hodgson Burnett's The Secret Garden and Chris Colfer's The Land Of Stories.

"My favourite song (in the musical) is Naughty, because you sometimes have to be a little bit naughty," she says with a grin. "Matilda and I are both a little bit naughty, but our parents are completely different – the exact opposite."

Nine-year-old Sofia Poston is one of four girls who will play the lead role in Matilda The Musical. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOONG

Her parents are Mr Graham Poston, 46, a senior partner at a leadership advisory firm, and Mrs Haryati Poston, 46, executive director of a non-governmental organisation that supports coastal communities.

Unlike Matilda's parents, who neglect their daughter, Sofia's parents are very much involved in her life and supportive of her theatre pursuits.

Aside from weeks of rehearsals in Cape Town, the actress, who will follow the production to China after Singapore, also has rehearsals over Skype and does 100 sit-ups a day. "There are a lot of hard (dance) moves (in the musical), they are very sharp... If I don't keep fit, the moves will seem harder each time."

It has been a lot of work, but Sofia, whose goal is to excel at singing, acting and dancing, is unfazed.

"I want to be an actress," she says. "A triple-threat."

BOOK IT / MATILDA THE MUSICAL

WHERE: Sands Theatre, Marina Bay Sands, 10 Bayfront Avenue

WHEN: Feb 21 to March 17, 7.30pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 2pm (Saturdays), 1 and 6pm (Sundays)

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Treading the fine line between human and animal

Malaysian author Choo Yangsze draws on, among other things, the myths of shape-shifting weretigers for her new book, The Night Tiger

Olivia Ho

Success is often rooted in failure.

In the case of Malaysian historical fantasy writer Choo Yangsze, failure was her first novel about an elephant detective, which she never finished, but which gave rise to two published novels – one a best-seller being adapted by Netflix.

"I sometimes wonder if I'm always writing the same book, just different parts of this world I've made," muses the 45-year-old over the telephone from California, where she lives with her husband and two schoolgoing children.

Her 2013 debut, The Ghost Bride, grew out of a subplot in the elephant detective novel, which also featured tigers – a key element of her new novel, The Night Tiger.

It is a banner year for Choo.

Just ahead of The Night Tiger's publication this month came the news that The Ghost Bride is being made into a Mandarin six-part drama by Netflix.

The book, a New York Times best-seller which was picked as Book Of The Week by television mogul Oprah Winfrey's book club, is about a young woman in 1890s Malacca who receives a strange proposal: relieve her family's debts by marrying the son of the wealthy Lim family – who happens to be dead.

Haunted by her ghostly suitor, she has to uncover the Lims' deadly secrets before she ends up trapped in the netherworld.

The Netflix series will be helmed by Malaysian directors Quek Shio Chuan and Ho Yuhang and stars Taiwanese actors Wu Kang-jen and Huang Peijia as well as Canadian-Chinese actor Ludi Lin.

Choo recalls being so excited on hearing of the Netflix adaptation that she could not sleep.

"I'm actually very happy that it's going to be a Chinese-language serial because that's my mother's favourite form of entertainment."

The daughter of a diplomat and a housewife, she spent a nomadic childhood in countries such as Germany, Thailand and Japan. She did not have access to many English books and so voraciously read old National Geographic magazines.

She left her job as a management consultant due to a wrist injury.

While being a housewife, she started writing late at night after her children had gone to bed.

"That worked out pretty well," she says, "except I would also get hungry, so there's a lot of food in my books. What we had to cut for both books were all these meals. My agent complained, 'Why are these people always eating?'"

The Night Tiger, which took her four to five years to write, is set in the 1930s in the Kinta Valley area of Perak, where her family is from.

"When my mum was little, she had a friend who was a child servant in an Englishman's house," she recalls. "I always thought about how in those big houses, the masters had no idea what the servants were doing because they couldn't even speak their language."

The Night Tiger features a colourful cast of characters, among them an 11-year-old doctor's houseboy, a dance hall hostess and, possibly, a weretiger. A weretiger is a supernatural being that shifts between man and tiger.

Choo drew on the myths of shape-shifting weretigers from across Asia, from the harimau jadian of Malay folklore, beasts who don human skins, to the covetous weretigers of Kerinci in Indonesia.

"The premise of were-creatures is fascinating," she says.

"They do stuff we're not supposed to, like killing and eating people. They transgress social mores. It's the question of what is human and what is animal – what divides us."

To research the world of 1930s Malaya, Choo dug up old shophouse diagrams and maps in the National Archives of Singapore; looked at doctors' bags and medical equipment in the museum at the former King Edward VII College of Medicine, which now houses Singapore's Ministry of Health; and even took a night class in dressmaking.

Her work is at the forefront of a wave of South-east Asian fantasy fiction coming out this year, with titles such as The True Queen, the second volume in Malaysian Zen Cho's Sorcerer Royal trilogy, and Singaporean J.Y. Yang's novella The Ascent To Godhood to look forward to.

"I don't think any one of us has to represent South-east Asia to the world," says Choo cautiously. "Everyone writes what he or she wants to write. If it makes people interested or want to visit these places, that's great.

"I hope my books are transporting. I think that's one of the nicest things about books, that by reading novels, you get to go live other people's lives."

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> **The premise of were-creatures is fascinating. They do stuff we're not supposed to, like killing and eating people. They transgress social mores. It's the question of what is human and what is animal – what divides us.**
>
> **MALAYSIAN HISTORICAL FANTASY WRITER CHOO YANGSZE**
> on the concept of weretigers

The Night Tiger (above) by author Choo Yangsze (left) is set in the 1930s in the Kinta Valley area of Perak, where her family is from. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF CHOO YANGSZE, QUERCUS

Review

Bewitching tale spanning family and the macabre

FICTION
THE NIGHT TIGER
By Choo Yangsze
Quercus/Paperback/473 pages/$27.95/
Major bookstores/★★★★☆

Olivia Ho

A young houseboy in 1930s colonial Malaya is tasked to search for his dead master's missing finger, which turns up in the possession of a reluctant dance hall hostess.

The incredible premise alone is enough to make one crack the spine of Malaysian-American writer Choo Yangsze's sophomore novel, in which magic, maybe-twins and man-eating man-tigers make for a captivating concoction.

When Ji Lin's day job as a dressmaker's apprentice fails to pay off her mother's gambling debts, she starts moonlighting at Ipoh's May Flower Dance Hall.

Because this is disreputable employment for a young woman, she has to keep it a secret from her abusive stepfather and his son from a previous marriage, Shin, a dashing medical student close to her in age and ambition, but not hampered by gender as she is.

When a dance hall patron leaves her a macabre souvenir – a shrivelled finger in a glass bottle – Ji Lin ropes Shin in to help her track down its origins, which complicates their already fraught sibling rivalry.

In the nearby town of Batu Gajah, 11-year-old Ren is searching for such a finger. He has 49 days to bury it with his late master Dr MacFarlane, who bequeathed him to another British doctor, William Acton.

These are uncertain times for a medical man in the Kinta Valley.

Fingers vanish from the morgue of the hospital where William works, corpses keep cropping up and rumour has it that a man-eating tiger stalks the area.

There is a mysterious connection between Ji Lin and Ren, a web that also enfolds Shin, Ren's dead twin brother Yi and possibly William. Something links them like the fingers of a hand.

Choo crafts a bewitching tale that traipses deftly between mirror worlds: the upstairs and downstairs of colonial households; the scandalous yet strictured dance hall and the hierarchies of the hospital; the world of the living and an afterlife of lonely railway stations and a river in which lurks something darker.

While the myth of the were-tiger is a febrile source of dread for much of the novel, it is curiously defanged by the end. Humanity, ultimately, proves more monstrous.

If you like this, read: Man Tiger by Eka Kurniawan, translated by Labodalih Sembiring (Verso, 2015, $32.38, Books Kinokuniya), set in a small Indonesian coastal town, in which a young man possessed by a supernatural white tigress commits a violent murder.

Bookmark This! Dreams and a drowning Bangkok

Join Life reporters Olivia Ho (right) and Toh Wen Li (far right) in this new monthly podcast by The Straits Times in which they talk about books in the headlines and recommend new reads.

In this episode, they dip into dreams and a drowning city in Singaporean poet Cyril Wong's phantasmagoric collection Oneiros, recently reprinted by Math Paper Press, and Thai author Pitchaya Sudbanthad's debut novel Bangkok Wakes To Rain, out later this month, which jumps through time from the 19th century to a post-diluvian future.

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Exclusively for subscribers of The Straits Times

Asian Masters cooking demonstration
by chef Selamat Susanto

Asian Masters returns for its seventh edition from March 1, 2019 till Feb 29, 2020 and celebrates the best of Asian gastronomy.

The programme line-up includes a series of cooking demonstrations by renowned chefs from top Asian restaurants.

An exclusive session, hosted by The Straits Times senior food correspondent Wong Ah Yoke, will see Selamat Susanto, head chef of Asian casual-dining concept Fat Chap, cook two dishes: oven-baked barramundi marinated South-east Asian-style and klapertart (coconut custard with almond flakes and rum-soaked raisins).

A menu daydreamer with a curious palate inspired by the love of flavourful ingredients, the Indonesia-born chef's passion for cooking stems from his family traditions of preparing and sharing meals together.

The Straits Times is giving away 30 pairs of passes to this session on March 2 at 10am.

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This cooking demonstration by chef Selamat Susanto and hosted by ST senior food correspondent Wong Ah Yoke is part of Asian Masters 2019. True or False?

The contest ends on Feb 22.
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Unflinching look at dark issues

Topics such as racism, mental illness and the killing of children are explored in The Weight Of Our Sky, the debut novel of Malaysian writer Hanna Alkaf

Olivia Ho

Malaysian writer Hanna Alkaf's debut work of fiction may be a young adult novel, but light-hearted it is not.

The Weight Of Our Sky depicts the May 13, 1969 race riots of Kuala Lumpur through the eyes of a teenage girl with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). It does not flinch from topics such as racism, mental illness or even the killing of children.

"It is dark, but also relevant," says the 33-year-old over the telephone from Kuala Lumpur, where she lives with her husband and two children aged three and five.

"I don't think this kind of darkness is something young people have the luxury of avoiding."

For a long time, she had contemplated writing about the riots, which erupted in the aftermath of the 1969 Malaysian general election. The official death toll was 196, although other sources have put the number as higher.

"It's not really talked about in Malaysia," says Hanna. "What we learn about it in history textbooks ends up being very sterile. I wanted to write about what it meant to live through something like that, what the human cost of it was."

In The Weight Of Our Sky, 16-year-old Melati Ahmad follows her friend Safiyah to watch a movie starring screen idol Paul Newman. Little do they know that the cinema will soon become an execution site.

Melati's search for her mother through the chaotic city is hampered by her OCD, which manifests to her as a djinn – a spirit in Muslim belief – forcing her to count or tap in certain patterns. She believes that if she does not obey the djinn, her mother will die.

"It's not an uncommon thing in the Malay community to talk about mental illness as invisible beings disturbing you," says Hanna. "I wouldn't say it's wrong or right, but it does sometimes get in the way of people getting the treatment they need."

It was not until she turned 30 that it occurred to her to return to fiction, which she had given up on after publishing a short story when she was 18.

A former journalist and senior writer at Marie Claire magazine, she researched the book as if she were writing it as a news feature: talking to riot survivors, reading materials and watching movies from the 1960s and checking details such as where people would buy music records or what kind of psychiatric treatment was available.

"These are events that really happened and places that still exist and I didn't want to tarnish any memories," she says. "Most of the incidents in the book have some basis in fact."

Though the riot happened 50 years ago, she still sees parallels today.

"I was editing this book in 2017 when Charlottesville happened," says Hanna, referring to the supremacist rally in the United States that resulted in the killing of a counter-protester.

"It just struck me how sad it was that you could take whole sentences from the book and apply it to America in 2017."

Given the local nature of her story, she was not expecting it to be picked up by international publishing house Simon and Schuster's imprint Salaam Reads.

"I'm always very upfront that I set out to write very Malaysian stories," she says. "I don't want to write stories that pander to a Western gaze.

"I love Malaysia. There are many ways you can be disappointed by a thing you love, but that doesn't stop you from loving it and wanting the best for it. My love for my country doesn't blind me from its issues and wanting to fight for it."

oliviaho@sph.com.sg

• The Weight Of Our Sky ($28.95) is available at Books Kinokuniya.

The Weight Of Our Sky by Malaysian writer Hanna Alkaf (above) traces the May 13, 1969 race riots of Kuala Lumpur through the eyes of a teenage girl with obsessive-compulsive disorder.
PHOTOS: AZALIA SUHAIMI, SALAAM READS

Review

Well-researched primer to current affairs

CURRENT AFFAIRS
THE NEW SILK ROADS: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE WORLD
By Peter Frankopan
Bloomsbury/291 pages/
$30.58 with GST/Books Kinokuniya/
★★★☆☆

Ong Sor Fern

Early in Peter Frankopan's book is a nugget of information about how the rise of China's middle class has led to a black market in donkey hides in Africa.

Donkey hides are an ingredient in a popular alternative medicine in China. Demand for the ingredient drove up the prices of the animals in African countries where they are crucial pack animals. As a result, some African countries have banned its export, leading to an emergence of a black market for such goods.

Another intriguing bit of trivia details how parents using talcum powder for their babies might be unwittingly linked in a supply chain that benefits the Taleban as well as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Afghanistan is home to rich mineral deposits, including hydrated magnesium silicate – also known as talcum powder – which are exploited by militant groups for funds.

These Freakonomics-style tidbits are characteristic of Frankopan's writing, as fans of his 2015 book The Silk Roads: A New History Of The World can attest.

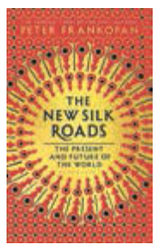
The professor of global history at Oxford University has an eye for the vivid detail that brings history alive on the page. And he is not short on ambition, as the sprawling narratives of his books demonstrate.

The New Silk Roads picks up where the previous book left off and attempts to further his central thesis that the Middle East, where ancient trade routes between the East and the West intersected, was and remains the beating heart of the world's geopolitical and economic systems.

This book, like its predecessor, is evidence of Frankopan's extensive and exhaustive research, as evinced by more than 60 pages of footnotes. Unlike his previous 650-odd-page tome, however, this one feels positively lightweight, literally and metaphorically.

Frankopan admits in his introduction that the book began life as an epilogue to The Silk Roads.

For those who have read the first book, this feels like a lengthy addendum to the previous book.



Peter Frankopan (left) has an eye for vivid detail and it shows in The New Silk Roads: The Present And Future Of The World (above).
PHOTOS: BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING

Anyone who has kept up with the tumult of current affairs and daily headlines in the past four years will find little that is new in the sections tracing United States President Donald Trump's foreign policy missteps. Ditto The Roads To Beijing chapter, which details the epic embrace, and darker implications of, China's One Belt, One Road initiative.

Regular readers of this newspaper, which has carried multiple opinion pieces on China's charm offensive as well as its flexing of military muscles, will find bare pickings here.

Frankopan is well-intentioned in pivoting from a Western-centric perspective to a viewpoint that acknowledges the centrality of the ancient Middle Eastern and Eastern civilisations.

But some of his writing about China, the Middle East and near East still read a little bit like white "mansplaining". Perhaps this is due to the erratic pitch of the narrative.

On one page, Frankopan explains succinctly the geopolitical implications of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline and why it is important.

On another page, he mentions in a throwaway line the landmark agreement on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, assuming readers already know the background to this issue which has stabilised prickly border relations among its five littoral states.

If his narrative is aimed at readers already well-versed enough to understand his references without searching the Internet for answers, then his insights are hardly earth-shattering.

The world is pivoting East as America and Europe's foreign policies, driven by domestic disagreements, become increasingly insular.

The economic rise of China, a long familiar tale in the latter half of the last millennium, is now accompanied by confident foreign policy forays as it seeks to consolidate its economic gains as well as fill the leadership vacuum left by America in the global order.

While Frankopan is not the only one documenting these hectic changes in the world order, he does have an informed perspective courtesy of his research and interest in global history.

What he succeeds best in doing with this book is to wrangle scary current affairs developments into a broader framework that takes into account world history prior to the Western dominated narrative of the past 300 years.

This approach works best as a primer for Western readers who want to learn more about the latest shifts in geopolitical positioning and what this may mean for the waning power of the West, in both the real world and in the narrative history of mankind.

In his concluding chapter, Frankopan writes: "This is no new world being born; it is an old world being reborn."

Asia is already aware of this. And it is about time the West woke up to this reality too.

If you like this, read: Dealing With An Ambiguous World by Bilahari Kausikan (World Scientific Publishing, 160 pages, $25.68 with GST, Books Kinokuniya). This series of lectures by the former diplomat on US-China relations, South China Sea disputes and Asean is informed by his long career in practical diplomacy and offers realpolitik insights on a rapidly changing world order.

Celebrate the Art of Living and Leaving Well

The author, Dr William Wan, General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement, will share his unique insights from his book, THROUGH THE VALLEY, on how people can age gracefully.

He will be joined by The Straits Times Senior Correspondent Lee Siew Hua.

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1. (2) **Love Looks Pretty On You** by Lang Leav
2. (1) **The Travelling Cat Chronicles** by Hiro Arikawa
3. (5) **The Next Person You Meet In Heaven** by Mitch Albom
4. (3) **Crazy Rich Asians** by Kevin Kwan
5. (4) **Rich People Problems** by Kevin Kwan
6. (9) **China Rich Girlfriend** by Kevin Kwan
7. (-) **Broken Stars** edited by Ken Liu
8. (-) **Legends Of The Condor Heroes #2: A Bond Undone** by Jin Yong
9. (-) **I Owe You One** by Sophie Kinsella
10. (8) **The Five People You Meet In Heaven** by Mitch Albom

NON-FICTION

1. (1) **Becoming** by Michelle Obama
2. (7) **Billion Dollar Whale** by Tom Wright and Bradley Hope
3. (5) **This Is What Inequality Looks Like** by Teo You Yenn
4. (3) **The Art Of Thinking Clearly** by Rolf Dobelli
5. (2) **The Subtle Art Of Not Giving A F*ck** by Mark Manson
6. (6) **Brief Answers To The Big Questions** by Stephen Hawking
7. (8) **Sapiens: A Brief History Of Humankind** by Yuval Noah Harari
8. (-) **When Breath Becomes Air** by Paul Kalanithi
9. (10) **Tall Order** by Peh Shing Huei
10. (9) **Ikigai** by Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles

CHILDREN'S

1. (1) **Dog Man #6: Brawl Of The Wild** by Dav Pilkey
2. (2) **Dog Man #5: Lord Of The Fleas** by Dav Pilkey
3. (3) **Diary Of A Wimpy Kid: The Meltdown** by Jeff Kinney
4. (4) **Dork Diaries #13: Tales From A Not-So-Happy Birthday** by Rachel Renee Russell
5. (-) **How To Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World Ultimate Movie Guide** by DreamWorks Animation
6. (6) **Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes Of Grindelwald – The Original Screenplay** by J.K. Rowling
6. (5) **Roblox Top Adventure Games** by Egmont
7. (8) **Roblox Annual 2019** by Egmont
8. (10) **Pinkfong ABC Activity Book** by Marshall Cavendish
9. (-) **Dog Man #3: A Tale Of Two Kitties** by Dav Pilkey
10. (-) **Dog Man #2: Unleashed** by Dav Pilkey

• This is The Straits Times' compilation of bestseller lists from Books Kinokuniya, Times, WHSmith and Popular bookstores.

A travel series every Tuesday.
The stories are also available in sgtravellers.com

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BON VOYAGE

Feast for the senses

Chan Siew Lian immerses herself in a sensory experience of Northern Kansai in Japan

Last November, I travelled to Northern Kansai in central Japan on a sponsored group tour. Getting to our first stop took a while: six hours on a red-eye flight from Singapore to Kansai international airport, three-and-a-half hours aboard two trains — and it wasn't over yet.

We still had a boat to catch and a cable car ride, after which the plan was to take in Amanohashidate — one of Japan's top Three Views — upside down, our heads between our legs.

CONTINUED ON D8

Above: View from the Kinosaki Onsen Ropeway observation deck.
Left: There are seven public hot springs to choose from at Kinosaki Onsen.
PHOTOS: TOYOOKA CITY, CHAN SIEW LIAN

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Do the matanozoki to get the best views of Amanohashidate — bend over and look between your legs for a flipped view of the sky and the sea.
PHOTO: KYOTO BY THE SEA DMO

Left: An outdoor bath at Kouno-yu, the oldest hot spring in Kinosaki Onsen town. Below: At a crab kaiseki dinner, the catch of the day becomes the highlight of your trip.
PHOTOS: TOYOOKA CITY

CONTINUED FROM D7

Feast for the senses

Smell: Pining for nature

Ah, my legs. They felt like chunks of Virginia ham marinating in inactivity. But as I stepped off the train at Amanohashidate Station, the fresh scent of 8,000 pine trees in the surrounding forest revived me.

Clean, sharp. It travelled up my nose and down my lungs as I breathed it all in.

"More! more!", my oxygen-starved lungs yelled as I stopped to inhale deeply. "A breath of fresh air" wasn't a metaphor in these parts, it was therapy.

Running after my travel companions, I realised that my legs had regained their feeling.

Sight: In search of the green dragon

Ask the locals and they will tell you that the god who created Japan once travelled back and forth between heaven and earth using a ladder. One day, the ladder fell and became Amanohashidate ("bridge to heaven"), a 3.6km-long sandbar that resembles a bridge over heaven from the north side, and a dragon flying to the heavens from the south side.

To unlock the best views, however, you will need to perform matanozoki — the crotch peek.

How this unconventional viewing method started here is hazy, but according to one account, it dates back to the 18th century, when an enterprising ship captain named Yoshida used matanozoki to promote Amanohashidate to tourists.

Ever willing to test the hype, I ascended the viewing platform at Kasamatsu Park and bent over, wary that there was no railing behind me.

Blood rushed to my head as the silver sea switched places with the grey sky. It was as if an optometrist had handed me corrective glasses: the vista cleared while colours became more pronounced.

All those nights spent stargazing surely taught Yoshida-san a thing or two about navigating the heavens.

Sound: It squeaks!

At the Kotohikihama beach in Kyotango, tourists run on the sand not for exercise, but to hear it squeak.

The Japanese call it naki-suna, or singing sand.

Mr Kazuo Okada, local guide and beach conservationist, demonstrated a range of sounds when he thumped the ground like a cajon, then "clapped" the sand between his hands to get that signature squeak.

Intrigued, I tried mimicking him, but there was only silence on my first attempt.

Sensing my disappointment, Mr Okada explained that the sand at Kotohikihama doesn't always squeak. Singing sand results from the friction between dry, clean sand and tiny quartz beads present in it. Japan has about 30 singing sand beaches.

I continued my naki-suna education at the Kotohikihama Singing Sand Museum. It was fun and enlightening, yet sombre. In particular, an exhibit on items stranded on Japan's shores — toys, fishing nets, cigarette lighters, syringes and microplastics — left a mark on me.

The local community organises clean-ups regularly to keep the beach pristine, and smoking is banned. Memories of a black sea remain — a Russian oil tanker ran aground in the Sea of Japan on Jan 2, 1997, spilling 6,000 kilolitres of heavy oil into its waters, triggering a crew of volunteers determined to clean up Japan's coast.

In a country where the sand's squeak is a precious natural heritage, I left Kotohikihama wondering if I would be able to listen to the sand's stories on my next visit — not just the rolling waves.

Taste: All crabbed out

"Winter is coming" can only mean one thing in Northern Kansai: snow crab season.

Many hotels and ryokans will give you the option of adding a crab kaiseki (multi-course) dinner to your stay. A hearty appetite is advised, as a line-up of fresh crabs comes your way: raw, steamed, grilled, tempura-style, for shabu shabu and in claypot rice. You may end up walking sideways after the feast, especially if you pair it with some locally brewed sake.

If you like your meals meaty, then Tajima beef deserves a place on your to-eat list. Purebred Tajima cattle are born, bred, and fattened for slaughter in what is now the northern Hyogo prefecture, an area surrounded by mountains.

While the world-famous Kobe beef represents the pinnacle of Tajima beef, locals love the latter so much, you might find Kobe beef being sold as Tajima beef. Tender and buttery smooth, it was the best beef I had ever tasted.

Feel: Being boiled alive

"Dig a hole anywhere in Japan, and you'll eventually find a hot spring," joked our translator earlier.

I studied the illustrated guides provided, internalising the steps. Donning a yukata, clogs and some borrowed courage, I shuffled to the hotel's private onsen (hot spring) bath and cautiously ventured in.

Thanks to its volcanic activity, Japan has over 27,000 naturally occurring hot springs, of which 3,000 have been converted into onsen resorts. For thousands of years, these springs have been used for healing and de-stressing.

Admittedly, "stressed" was closer to what I was feeling. Entering the room marked "Women", I was greeted by two rows of lockers and a naked woman. I pretended not to see her and proceeded to remove my clothes.

Wearing only a locker key around my wrist, I entered the onsen via a sliding door.

Steam rose till it hit the ceiling and turned to water droplets, giving the effect of a perspiring cave chamber. On my right were shower stalls for guests to clean up before entering the bath.

That done, I was ready for my first dip. I lowered myself slowly into the bath, mimicking Rodin's The Thinker, as the heat numbed my thermoreceptors.

Minutes of awkward posing passed before I decided to head to the outdoor onsen. The cool night air made a lovely contrast to the bath's 40-deg C water.

Entering it, with gentle music in the background, I finally felt my muscles relax.

The writer's trip is sponsored by Visit Northern Kansai.

Head to the Visit Northern Kansai booth at the NATAS travel fair (Feb 22 to 24) or check out visit-nkansai.com for more information.

SPOTS THAT SPARK JOY

Kinosaki Onsen
You know this place takes bathing seriously when there is an app that shows how busy its seven public hot springs are. Guests walk the willow-lined main street in traditional yukata and geta (wooden clogs), armed with a one-day pass that allows entry into any of the public onsen, and a small basket for the bare essentials.

Onsenji Temple
Midway up the Kinosaki Ropeway lies the temple's main building. What draws visitors is its 2m-tall, 11-headed Kannon Buddha that is currently on display until April 24, 2021. It is unveiled once every 33 years, for a period of three years. The next time you can see the statue would be three decades from now.

Genbudo Cave Park
Fans of natural patterns will find the hexagonal rock columns at Genbudo a sight to behold. Formed from a volcanic eruption 1.6 million years ago, the basalt structures bend and flow like bands of rock improvising to jazz.

Izushi Kabuki Theatre
Kabuki is synonymous with elaborate costumes, exaggerated make-up and dramatic acting. A guided tour (albeit in Japanese) at the oldest Kabuki theatre in the Kansai region takes you through hidden trap doors, rotating floors and a slice of Japan's performing arts history.

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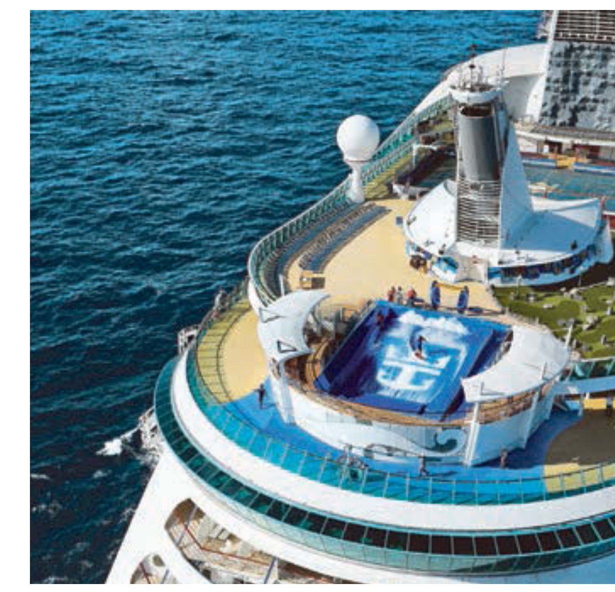

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10D Autumn Northern Lights in Finland and Norway + North Cape Kemi/Rovaniemi/Saariselka/Honningsvag/Alta/Tromso Dep: Sep-Oct 2019 2nd pax fr$3088
10D Aurora Chasing In Norway + Northern Lights Island Tromso/Harstad/Lofoten Island/Senja Dep: Sep 2019-Mar 2020 2nd pax fr$3588
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Dream play began as a little boy's nightmare

Toy Factory Productions' The Transition Room is inspired by playwright Stanley Seah's thoughts about death and life

Akshita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

A nightmarish experience when he was only seven years old led Stanley Seah to eventually write and direct his dream play for Toy Factory Productions.

The Transition Room, a play about life, death and in-between places, runs at the Drama Centre Black Box from Feb 21 to March 2.

The narrative begins with Mike (Christer Jon Aplin) in a room with five other people (played by Marc Valentine Chia, Kaykay Nizam, Tan Hui Er, Jazmine Monaz and Victoria Chen). Mike is waiting for something to happen, but the reason he is present in that space is unclear.

It is a set-up familiar to viewers of the life-after-death show The Good Place, but Seah wrote his script four years ago, before the first season of the Netflix production aired.

He says, laughing: "I don't know how they got a copy of my script. There are similarities, but also big differences."

The 28-year-old dates his inspiration to when he was seven and woke up from a dream where he was somewhere dark, where nothing changed. "I woke up and thought: 'Is this what death is?' I remember being incredibly scared," he says.

Fast forward some years and "the darkness isn't scary any more". Instead, he was so intrigued by the idea of what might happen after death that he turned his conjectures into an open-ended play for a school show. He wanted to get parents off their phones and engaged in their children's performances. It worked – the post-show dialogue lasted almost two hours.

He also sent the script to Toy Factory Productions' artistic director Goh Boon Teck, hoping to get it produced. Now an associate artistic director with the theatre group, he presented a dramatised reading of The Transition Room in 2017, at Toy Factory's shophouse space in Smith Street.

Scaling it up for the Drama Centre Black Box has posed some challenges, such as re-creating the sense of surreal intimacy which Seah says is key to the success of the performance. The audience is not expected to participate in the play – Seah himself dislikes being called forward when he is a viewer – but the experience is meant to be immersive.

The production design uses sets (by Vivien Lau), light (by Tai Zi Feng) and sound (by Vick Low) to play with the viewers' ideas of how large or small the space is. Props are sometimes replaced with aural or visual effects.

"In the play, we question the existence of the room itself and what the room is like," says 29-year-old Low.

Tai, 28, adds: "We don't want the audience to take anything for granted."

The Transition Room is an absurdist play, adhering to the philosophy that it is important to find meaning and order in existence but also ridiculous to attempt to impose meaning on existence. Seah is drawn to this style as a means of examining the world. "Absurdism says that life is meaningless, but that doesn't mean we go out and pillage and murder," he says.

"Whether or not there's religion, whether or not there's a God, should it matter? The answer to me is: 'No.' We should still yearn to be kind to each other."

akshitan@sph.com.sg

From left: Toy Factory Productions' set and costume designer Vivien Lau, stage manager Jovy Tan, associate artistic director Stanley Seah, lighting designer Tai Zi Feng, sound designer Vick Low and actress Tan Hui Er. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

BOOK IT / THE TRANSITION ROOM

WHERE: Drama Centre Black Box, Level 5 National Library Building, 100 Victoria Street

WHEN: Feb 21 to March 2, various times

ADMISSION: $38 (for Feb 21), $45 from https://bit.ly/2TGXSxL

INFO: www.toyfactory.com.sg/

Louvre Abu Dhabi introduces Rembrandt, Vermeer

ABU DHABI • The Louvre Abu Dhabi, the first museum to carry the famed name outside of France, announced on Sunday it will roll out works by Dutch masters Rembrandt van Rijn and Johannes Vermeer this month.

Works by the two artists are part of the gallery's first exhibition this year, entitled Rembrandt, Vermeer And The Dutch Golden Age: Masterpieces From The Leiden Collection And The Musee Du Louvre.

The exhibit, on display in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) capital from Thursday to May 18, is dedicated to Rembrandt, Vermeer and the famed "fijnschilders" – fine painters known for their detailed work – of the Netherlands.

"Rembrandt is a master of the Golden Age," museum head Manuel Rabate told Agence France-Presse. "He's a universal genius, he's connected to the world."

The exhibition features 95 works, including Vermeer's Young Woman Seated At A Virginal alongside Rembrandt's Portrait Of A Man and Study Of The Head And Clasped Hands Of A Young Man As Christ In Prayer.

The museum has also acquired Rembrandt's Head Of A Young Man, With Clasped Hands: Study Of The Figure Of Christ as part of its permanent collection.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi was inaugurated with great pomp in November 2017 – nearly five years behind schedule – by French President Emmanuel Macron and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed Zayed Al-Nahyan.

It was marketed as "a universal museum" celebrating cultural exchange and tolerance.

The museum has reportedly cost the UAE around US$1 billion (S$1.36 billion), including upwards of US$500 million to use France's Louvre brand.

Officials have not confirmed the price tag.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Study Of The Head And Clasped Hands Of A Young Man As Christ In Prayer, oil on oak panel, by Dutch painter Rembrandt on display at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Westlife's new single and create your own light show

Life reporters (from left) Olivia Ho, Melissa Sim, Anjali Raguraman and Boon Chan.

Tune in to ST podcast Life Picks, in which Life reporters highlight the best films, concerts, restaurants and arts events.

This week, Life reporters Anjali Raguraman, Boon Chan and Olivia Ho chat with host Melissa Sim about Irish group Westlife's newest single Hello My Love and The i Light Singapore bicentennial edition which runs till Feb 24.

Highlights of the festival include an interactive piano that the public can play at Fort Canning to create an instant light show and bridges along the Singapore River that have been lit by Singapore and international artists.

SCAN TO LISTEN
https://bit.ly/2tkhAnj

Comics

BABY BLUES

GARFIELD

Free to air

CHANNEL 5

AM
6.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
7.00 First Look Asia (Simulcast From CNA) (CA)
9.00 The Dr Oz Show 10 (PG) (IE)
10.00 The $100,000 Pyramid 2 (PG) (V)
10.30 Everyday Gourmet 3 (HD) (IE)
11.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
PM
12.00 Martha Bakes 7 (IE)
12.30 Gordon Ramsay's Ultimate Cookery Course (IE)
1.00 Wheel Of Fortune 36 (CC) (V)
1.30 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)
2.00 Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd 4 (SC)
2.30 Euromaxx (Cul)
3.00 The Dr Oz Show 10 (PG) (IE)
4.00 Make You Laugh Out Loud 3 (V)
4.30 Survivor 36 (PG) (V)
5.30 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
6.30 The $100,000 Pyramid 2 (PG) (V)
7.00 Wheel Of Fortune 36 (CC) (V)
7.30 Tricked (Canada) (PG) (CC) (V)
8.00 The Carbonaro Effect 4 (PG) (CC) (V)
8.30 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)
9.00 News 5 (HD)
9.30 Meet The MP 2 (PG) (CC) (SC)
10.00 The Leap Years (CC) (M) (Premiere)
AM
12.00 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)
12.30 Code Of Law 4 (PG13) (D)
1.30 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)
2.20 Hawaii Five-0 7 (PG) (D)
3.10 Lethal Weapon (PG13) (D)
4.10 Martha Bakes 7 (IE)
4.40 Gordon Ramsay's Ultimate Cookery Course (IE)
5.10 The Dr Oz Show 10 (PG) (IE)

CHANNEL 8

AM
6.00 What's In The Fridge? (HD) (V)
7.00 Kids In Charge (V)
7.30 Hello Singapore Highlights (News)
8.00 Walk With Me (PG) (CC) (D)
9.00 Morning Express (HD) (News)
9.30 Jalan Jalan (PG) (CC) (D)
10.00 Are You Up For It? (V)
10.30 Night Market Life Aka Life (PG) (D)
PM
12.30 Taste With Jason 10 (CC) (IE)
1.00 News 8 At One (HD) (News)
1.30 118 (PG) (CC) (D)
2.00 Train Your Brain (HD) (S)
2.30 The Precedents (PG) (D)
3.30 The Golden Path (CC) (D)
4.30 Taste Of Life (PG) (D)
5.30 When Duty Calls (PG) (CC) (D)
6.30 Hello Singapore (News)
7.30 Jalan Jalan (CC) (D)
8.00 Emergency! (PG) (CC) (V)
8.30 Tuesday Report – The Dream Catchers (CC) (IE)
9.00 Walk With Me (PG) (CC) (D)
10.00 News Tonight
10.30 Stay Healthy Stay Happy 2017 (IE)
11.00 Princess Agents (PG) (D)
AM
12.00 The Princess Weiyoung (PG) (D)
1.00 Wonderful World 13 (V)
2.00 Fiery Passion (D)
4.00 A Place Called Home (PG) (D)

CHANNEL U

PM
3.00 Taiwan 1001 Stories (IE)
4.00 Taste From Home (CC) (IE)
5.00 Cheongdamdong Scandal (PG) (CC) (D)
6.00 The Girl Who Sees Smells (PG) (CC) (D)
7.00 My Father Is Strange (PG) (CC) (D)
9.00 Food Secrets (CC) (IE)
10.00 Brother's Keeper 2 (PG) (CC) (D)
11.00 News Tonight
11.30 Food Secrets (CC) (IE)
AM
12.30 My Father Is Strange (PG) (CC) (D)
2.30 Close

CNA

AM
6.00 Singapore Tonight
7.00 First Look Asia
9.00 Asia Business First
10.02 Blueprint For Survival
11.00 News Now
PM
1.02 Undercover Asia 6
2.00 News Now
4.02 Blueprint For Survival
5.00 News Now
7.02 Undercover Asia 6 (CC)
8.00 Primetime Asia
9.02 When We Play (CC)
10.00 Singapore Tonight
11.02 Undercover Asia 6
AM
12.00 News Now
12.30 Power List Asia 5
1.02 When We Play
2.00 News Now
2.30 Asia Exposed
3.02 Blueprint For Survival
4.00 News Now
4.30 Power List Asia 5
5.02 When We Play
Programmes may be pre-empted by breaking news

VASANTHAM

PM
3.00 Super Samayal 4 (IE)
3.30 Anjaraipetti 5 (IE)
4.00 Priyasakhi (D)
4.30 Thedal – Star Search 2016 (HD) (V)
5.30 Mighty Raju Animation Series (S)
6.00 Raama Seetha (PG) (D)
7.00 Konjam Soru Konjam Varalaru (CC) (Cul)
7.30 Mella Thiranthatu Katavu 3 (PG) (CC) (D)
8.00 Uyire (PG) (CC) (D)
8.30 Tamil Seithi (News)
9.00 Adayaalam (CC) (Cul)
10.00 Rowthiram (PG13) (CC) (D)
10.30 Nijangal (PG) (CC) (D)
11.00 Maalai Maalai Vasantham (V)
11.30 Tamil Seithi (Encore) (News)
AM
12.00 Close

OKTO

AM
9.00 Tip The Mouse (P)
9.30 Teddies (P)
10.00 Andy's Prehistoric Adventures (P)
10.30 Sesame Street (P)
11.00 Mouk (P)
11.30 Ready Jet Go! (P)
PM
12.00 Hiccup & Sneeze (P)
12.30 Teddies (P)
1.00 Coconut The Little Dragon (P)
1.30 Tip The Mouse (P)
2.00 Andy's Prehistoric Adventures (P)
2.30 Sesame Street (P)
3.00 Mouk (P)
3.30 Ready Jet Go! (P)
4.00 Odd Squad (S)
4.30 Captain Flinn And The Pirate Dinosaurs (S)
5.00 Littlest Pet Shop (S)
5.30 Marcus Level (S)
6.00 OddBods (S)
6.30 Museum Mysteries (S)
7.00 My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic (CC) (S)
7.30 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (CC) (S)
8.00 Turning Mecard (S)
8.30 Inazuma Eleven (CC) (S)
9.00 ATP 250: Montpellier 2019 (Sports)
11.00 American Ninja Warrior 6 (HD) (PG) (Sports)
AM
12.00 Close

SURIA

PM
3.00 Juxbox Ekspres
4.00 Bibik-Bibikku (PG) (D)
5.00 Mak Cun 4 (PG) (CC) (D)
6.00 Medic Kid (CC) (S)
6.30 Kelana Rasa (CC) (IE) (Finale)
7.00 Makmum Yang Paling Aku Cinta (PG) (CC) (D)
8.00 Berita (News)
8.30 Kek Champion (CC) (V)
9.30 Rapuh (PG) (CC) (D)
10.30 Bingit (PG) (D)
11.30 Berita (HD) (News) (R)
AM
12.00 Close

C: Children; CA: Current Affairs; CC: Closed Captions; Cul: Culture; D: Drama; IE: Info-Ed; M: Movies; P: Preschool; PG: Parental Guidance; R: Repeat; S: Schoolkids; SC: Sitcom; V: Variety

Programme schedules correct at time of printing. Telecast details from Mediacorp, StarHub and Singtel TV. For pay TV updates,go to www.starhub.com/tv or www.singteltv.com.sg

StarHub TV

HISTORY (CHANNEL 401)

AM
8.30 Swamp People 8
9.30 Detroit Steel
10.25 The Pickers 9
11.20 Counting Cars 7
PM
12.15 The Curse Of Oak Island 4
1.10 Swamp People 8
2.05 Pawn Stars 18
2.35 Storage Wars: Texas 6
3.00 Storage Wars 10
3.30 Detroit Steel
4.25 The Pickers 9
5.20 Counting Cars 7
6.15 Swamp People 8
7.10 Pawn Stars 18
8.05 Storage Wars: Texas 6
8.30 Storage Wars 10
9.00 Storage Wars 11
9.25 Storage Wars: Texas 5
9.55 Forged In Fire 4
10.50 Mountain Men 7
11.45 The Curse Of Oak Island 4

LIFETIME (CHANNEL 514)

AM
8.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
9.00 Gok's Fill Your House For Free
10.00 Making A Model With Yolanda Hadid
11.00 Atlanta Plastic 2
PM
12.00 Dance Moms 7
1.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
2.00 My Christmas Prince
3.35 Leah Remini: Scientology & The Aftermath
4.30 Live PD Presents: Women On Patrol
5.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
6.00 Man Vs Child: Chef Showdown 2
7.00 The Amazing Race Canada 3
8.00 Love At First Flight
9.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16
10.00 Sea Change
11.35 Man Vs Child: Chef Showdown 2

HBO (CHANNEL 601)

AM
7.25 Tom And Jerry: Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory
8.45 An Inconvenient Truth
10.20 Bridget Jones's Baby (NC16)
PM
12.20 Gladiator (NC16)
2.50 Little Big League
4.50 Maid In Manhattan
6.30 Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen
9.00 The 15:17 To Paris (NC16)
10.30 Starsky & Hutch (NC16)

CINEMAX (CHANNEL 611)

AM
8.00 Bugs (NC16)
9.25 Hollywood Homicide (PG)
11.20 Strike Back 6 (NC16)
PM
12.25 The Saint
2.20 The Last Boyscout (NC16)
4.00 MacArthur
6.05 Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge Of The Sith
8.25 48 Hrs
10.00 From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money (M18)
11.30 Looking Glass (NC16)

HUB E CITY (CHANNEL 825)

AM
8.15 Hot Door Night 16 (HD)
9.15 Dowry (HD)
10.15 Perfect Dating 6 (HD)
11.45 Hong Kong Neighbourhood Gems (HD)
PM
12.15 Still Loving You (HD)
1.30 Signal (HD)
2.45 Hot Door Night 11
3.45 The Doctor (HD)
4.45 Still Loving You (HD)
6.00 Dowry (HD)
7.00 Hot Door Night 16 (HD)
8.00 Viva La Romance (HD)
10.00 Noble Aspirations (HD)
11.00 Hot Door Night 16 (HD)

HUB SPORTS 1 (CHANNEL 201)

AM
6.00 Multi Sport: Action Sports World 2018
7.00 ISU Four Continents Figure Skating Championships 2019: Opening Ceremony And Men's Short Programme
PM
12.30 Tennis: ATP World Tour Uncovered 2019
1.00 Tennis: Fed Cup By BNP Paribas 2019 First Round Czech Republic Vs Romania: Day 1 Rubber 1 & 2
5.00 Motorsports: FIA World RallyCross Championship 2018 Round 12 South Africa Highlights
6.00 Tennis: ATP 500 ABN Amro World Tennis Tournament: Day 2 Session 1

HUB SPORTS 2 (CHANNEL 202)

AM
7.00 Football: EFL Championship 2018 Matchday 31 Aston Villa Vs Sheffield United
9.00 Wrestling: WWE Raw (PG13) (Live)
PM
12.00 Magazine: Omnisport.TV
12.30 Basketball: Asean Basketball League 2018/19 Singapore Slingers Vs Saigon Heat
2.30 Football: EFL Championship 2018 Matchday 31 Stoke City Vs West Bromwich Albion
4.30 Wrestling: WWE Experience (PG)
5.30 Basketball: National Basketball League Round 17 Cairns Taipans Vs Brisbane Bullets
7.30 Magazine: Omnisport.TV
8.00 Wrestling: WWE This Week (PG)
8.30 Football: The EFL Highlights 2018/19
9.00 Football: The Football Review
9.30 Basketball: Asean Basketball League 2018/19 Westports Malaysia Dragons Vs Macau Black Bears
11.30 Magazine: Omnisport.TV

Singtel TV

CARTOON NETWORK (CHANNEL 226)

AM
6.00 Oggy & The Cockroaches
7.00 The Tom And Jerry Show
8.00 Teen Titans Go!
9.00 Grizzy And The Lemmings
9.30 The Tom And Jerry Show
10.00 We Bare Bears
10.30 Supernoobs
11.00 The Powerpuff Girls
PM
12.00 Teen Titans Go!
1.00 We Bare Bears
2.00 Ninjago: Masters Of Spinjitzu
2.30 Craig Of The Creek
3.00 Rat-A-Tat
3.30 The Amazing World Of Gumball
4.00 We Bare Bears
4.30 The Powerpuff Girls
5.00 Teen Titans Go!
5.30 Craig Of The Creek
6.00 Ben 10 Challenge
6.30 Oggy & The Cockroaches
7.00 The Tom And Jerry Show
7.30 Grizzy And The Lemmings
8.00 We Bare Bears
9.00 The Powerpuff Girls
10.00 Regular Show
10.30 Steven Universe
11.00 Clarence
11.30 Adventure Time

AXN (HD) (CHANNEL 304)

AM
6.00 MacGyver 2
6.50 Seal Team
7.40 Team Ninja Warrior
9.25 MacGyver 2
10.20 Seal Team
11.10 The Amazing Race Asia 5
PM
1.00 Quantico 3
1.55 Team Ninja Warrior
2.50 MacGyver 2
3.40 Seal Team
4.30 The Amazing Race Asia 5
6.20 Hawaii Five-0 9
7.10 Caught On Camera With Nick Cannon 2
8.00 Charlie's Angels
10.00 The Blacklist 6
10.55 MacGyver 3
11.50 Bad Boys II

WARNER TV (HD) (CHANNEL 306)

AM
6.00 The Carbonaro Effect 2
6.50 Major Crimes 5
7.40 DC's Legends Of Tomorrow
8.25 Person Of Interest 4
9.15 The Flash 4
10.05 The Carbonaro Effect 2
10.55 Almost Genius
11.45 Harry Potter And The Half-Blood Prince
PM
2.35 Friends 9
3.05 Almost Genius
3.55 The Flash 4
4.45 Person Of Interest 4
5.35 Major Crimes 5
6.25 Friends 9
6.55 Troy
9.50 Arrow 7
10.40 The Big Bang Theory 9
11.05 Friends 9
11.35 Race To The Scene

COMEDY CENTRAL ASIA (HD) (CHANNEL 324)

AM
6.00 At Midnight With Chris Hardwick 2
6.25 The Daily Show 24
6.55 Just For Laughs Gags 14
7.20 Mr Bean
7.40 Most Ridiculous
8.10 Amazingness
8.35 Mr Bean
9.05 Caraoke Showdown
9.30 Just For Laughs Gags 14
9.55 Hot In Cleveland 2
10.45 Mr Bean
11.05 Saturday Night Live 43
11.55 The Daily Show 24
PM
12.20 Margaret Cho And Friends
1.05 The Comedy Jam
1.55 Saturday Night Live 43
2.40 The Burn With Jeff Ross 2
3.00 Jeff Ross Presents Roast Battle II: War Of The Words
3.50 Lip Sync Battle 4
4.40 Mr Bean
5.10 Inside Comedy 2
5.40 The Daily Show 24
6.10 Your Face Or Mine 4
6.40 Amazingness
7.05 Above Average Presents
7.10 Billy On The Street 3
7.35 Above Average Presents
7.40 Most Ridiculous
8.10 Caraoke Showdown
8.35 Lip Sync Battle 4
9.05 Saturday Night Live 44
9.50 50 Central
10.30 Inside Amy Schumer
10.55 Above Average Presents
11.00 The Jim Jefferies Show
11.25 Above Average Presents
11.30 The Daily Show 24

JIA LE (HD) (CHANNEL 502)

AM
6.00 Taste Of Love
7.00 First Love
8.00 Entrepreneurial Age
9.00 Eagle And Youngster
10.00 100% Wife
PM
12.10 First Love
1.00 In The Name Of Love
2.00 100% Wife
4.10 Entrepreneurial Age
5.00 First Love
6.00 In The Name Of Love
7.00 100% Wife
9.10 First Love
10.00 Entrepreneurial Age
11.00 Eagle And Youngster

TheStarsSay

Aries (March 21 - April 19)
Tech is essential, so make sure you have the latest must-have gadgets.

Taurus (April 20 - May 20)
Put off deciding what to do next and enjoy the social buzz. Some decisions can wait.

Gemini (May 21 - June 20)
You are filled with amazing energy – use it to come up with new ideas and see who will join you.

Cancer (June 21 - July 22)
Take responsibility for your own actions. It is one of those times when confusion reigns.

Leo (July 23 - Aug 22)
Listen to what your friends are trying to say. It might not be what you want to hear, but it is great advice.

Virgo (Aug 23 - Sept 22)
Do your best despite your circumstances. Even if you feel hopeless, your efforts can still make a difference.

Libra (Sept 23 - Oct 22)
Talk up the latest big business in your life – it is important and the world needs to hear about it.

Scorpio (Oct 23 - Nov 21)
Things might not work out as you had planned if you take that gamble. Do not fret: They should get better.

Sagittarius (Nov 22 - Dec 21)
You have a lot going on, so much that you might find it difficult to make progress on any one project.

Capricorn (Dec 22 - Jan 19)
Avoid the urge to chatter away at work or at school – you need to focus and so do your people.

Aquarius (Jan 20 - Feb 18)
Do what it takes to get your message out. Things are looking up, but only if you are willing to push it.

Pisces (Feb 19 - March 20)
Everything you thought was true turns out to be just comforting. It is time to push through the issue.

• Provided by Astrology.com (www.astrology.com)

Radio

KISS92

AM
6.00 Maddy, Jason & Arnold In The Morning
10.00 Carol Smith
PM
1.00 Charmaine Yee
4.00 Shan Wee
8.00 Josh's Goodnight Kiss

ONE FM 91.3

AM
6.00 ONE FM's #1 Breakfast Show With Glenn And The Flying Dutchman
10.00 Cheryl Miles
PM
4.00 Weekdays With ONE FM

MONEY FM 89.3

AM
6.00 The Breakfast Huddle With Elliott Danker, Yasmin Jonkers & Ryan Huang
10.00 Midday With Howie Lim
PM
2.00 Prime Time With Claressa Monteiro
4.00 The Curve With Michelle Martin & Bernard Lim

UFM100.3

AM
6.00 UFM100.3 Mornings With Wenhong, Limei & Xiaozhu
10.00 Lively Life With Kemin
PM
1.00 Tea With Yuling
4.00 Sing-a-long With Xinying & Weilong
8.00 Feel The Night With Chengyao

96.3 HAO FM

AM
6.00 Morning Drive Time With Jing Yun, De Ming And Jie Qi
10.00 Lunch Break With Anna
PM
1.00 Automation
4.00 Evening Drive Time With Li Yi And Guo Xian
8.00 Night Time With Wei Wen

Tides

SUN RISE/SET TIME: 7.17am/7.21pm
MOON RISE/SET TIME: 12.30pm/12.08am

TIDES TODAY: Singapore: 3.22am (2.7m), 9.28am (1.1m), 3.33pm (2.5m), 9.26pm (1.2m). Desaru: 2.58am (2.5m), 9.05am (1.3m), 3.20pm (2.4m), 9.13pm (1.5m). Port Dickson: 5.07am (0.7m), 10.43am (2m), 4.52pm (0.5m), 11.21pm (2.2m). Mersing: 2.24am (2.7m), 8.43am (1.4m), 3.06pm (2.5m), 8.42pm (1.8m).

TIDES TOMORROW: Singapore: 4.01am (2.7m), 10.31am (1.1m), 4.43pm (2.3m), 10.15pm (1.4m). Desaru: 3.24am (2.5m), 9.56am (1.3m), 4.31pm (2.3m), 10.05pm (1.7m). Port Dickson: 6.01am (0.9m), 11.31am (1.8m), 5.42pm (0.6m). Mersing: 2.49am (2.6m), 9.25am (1.3m), 4.16pm (2.5m), 9.59pm (2m).

For updates and more details, call Meteorological Service Singapore, NEA, on 6542-7788 or go to www.nea.gov.sg

Top Baftas go to Roma, The Favourite

From top: Alfonso Cuaron takes home Best Director for Roma; Olivia Colman clinches Best Actress for The Favourite; and Rami Malek wins Best Actor for Bohemian Rhapsody. Right: Rachel Weisz with her Best Supporting Actress award.

LONDON • The Favourite, a dark comedy about a love triangle involving Queen Anne in 18th-century Britain, was the big winner of the EE British Academy Film Awards on Sunday in London, picking up seven awards.

Mexican film-maker Alfonso Cuaron's Roma took home four accolades – including the two most coveted ones, Best Film and Best Director – at the British equivalent of the Oscars.

During an acceptance speech, Cuaron said the success of Roma, a film about an indigenous domestic worker in Mexico, meant the world to him, especially "in an age when fear and anger propose to divide us".

The Favourite had been tipped to win big. It gained 12 nominations last month, five more than any other film, and received rave reviews in Britain.

While it did not quite meet those expectations, Olivia Colman clinched Best Actress for her role as Queen Anne, repeating her success at last month's Golden Globes. Rachel Weisz won Best Supporting Actress for her performance as one of the queen's advisers and lovers.

Colman said in her acceptance speech that all three of the film's actresses, including Emma Stone, should share her Best Actress title.

"We can scratch in some other names," she said.

Letitia Wright, a star of Black Panther, won the Rising Star Award for young talent, which is decided by the British public. She had depression and considered giving up acting, she said in her speech.

"Anybody that's going through a tough time, God made you and you're important," she added.

Rami Malek won Best Actor for his role as Freddie Mercury in Bohemian Rhapsody, while Mahershala Ali won Best Supporting Actor for his role as an erudite pianist in Green Book, a road movie set in 1962 about race relations. Both won such awards at the Golden Globes too.

The Baftas, awarded two days before voting begins for the Oscars, are often considered a bellwether for the Academy Awards.

The Favourite has been nominated for 10 Academy Awards, tying with Roma and setting up another showdown at that event on Feb 24.

The Baftas lacked the seriousness of last year's ceremony, when actresses wore black and Time's Up pins to protest sexual harassment.

The event on Sunday was light-hearted, with political commentary limited to a couple of asides about Britain's impending exit from the European Union. Andy Serkis, handing out an award for best music, said a film without music was like Britain without Europe.

The run-up to this year's Baftas was fraught. Last week, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, which hosts the awards, removed director Bryan Singer from its nominations because of allegations of his sexual misconduct, including molesting a 13-year-old boy.

The academy said in a statement: "Bafta considers the alleged behaviour completely unacceptable and incompatible with its values."

Singer, who has denied the allegations, made no comment on Bafta's decision, Mr Howard Bragman, his publicist, said in an e-mail last Friday.

Singer was part of the team involved in Bohemian Rhapsody, the biopic of rock band Queen that was nominated for Outstanding British Film. He is listed as the film's sole director due to union regulations, despite having been fired before it was finished. The Favourite won that category.

Bohemian Rhapsody, which received six other nominations, also won for Best Sound, in addition to Malek's award. NYTIMES

Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh (above) and American-French actor Timothee Chalamet (below) on the red carpet at the Baftas. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, EPA-EFE, REUTERS

Pitt shows up at Aniston's 50th birthday bash

LOS ANGELES • Will we see romance rekindle between former celebrity couple Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt (both left)?

Aniston, who turned 50 yesterday, held her birthday bash at a hotel in Los Angeles last Saturday evening – and one of the guests was her former husband, actor Pitt.

Aniston was one of the first to arrive at the party, according to E! News. Pitt arrived 45 minutes after her and appeared to be in a "good mood and happy to be there", according to website Entertainment Tonight.

The 55-year-old actor was seen wearing a hat and a dark shirt as he tried to keep a low profile when he attended the bash.

A source told People website that Aniston was "very happy that he showed up" and "they hugged and chatted for a bit".

However, she "didn't really pay any special attention to Brad" as she was also "busy making sure all of her other guests had an amazing time".

The other guests included Pitt's former fiancee Gwyneth Paltrow, Aniston's ex-boyfriend John Mayer, Mayer's ex-girlfriend Katy Perry and Perry's boyfriend Orlando Bloom.

Other celebrities present included George Clooney, Reese Witherspoon, Ellen DeGeneres, Kate Hudson, Demi Moore, Barbra Streisand and Robert Downey Jr.

Another source told the Entertainment Tonight website that when Pitt left the party, the hotel staff and his security team helped ensure that it was difficult to take photographs of him.

Aniston met Pitt in 1998 and they dated for two years before they married in 2000, becoming a high-profile couple in Hollywood. They divorced in 2005 after Pitt was linked to his Mr & Mrs Smith (2005) co-star Angelina Jolie.

He went on to marry Jolie in 2014, while Aniston married actor Justin Theroux in 2015.

Pitt and Jolie split in 2016, while Aniston and Theroux announced their separation in February last year.

Pitt was recently linked romantically to actress Charlize Theron.

Jonah Hill's debut film explores masculinity in 1990s

BERLIN • Famous for the "bro comedies" of his early career, actor Jonah Hill now wants to challenge traditional concepts of masculinity with his directorial debut film about a group of troubled young skaters in 1990s Los Angeles.

Mid90s, a coming-of-age movie presented at the Berlin Film Festival, follows 13-year-old Stevie who, beaten by his older brother, seeks solace with a group of troubled skaters hanging around a shop smoking and making crude jokes.

The shy boy becomes a troublesome teenager spiralling out of control as he starts drinking and smoking, steals money from his mother and hooks up with an older girl at a party in an attempt to fit in with his "cool" new friends.

Hill said he wanted to show how harmful the boys' often misogynistic and homophobic language is, and explore how their inability to express emotional pain led to bad decisions.

"In America at that time in the 1990s, traditional masculinity was not to show emotion, not to show sensitivity, not to show vulnerability because it's feminine or, God forbid, gay to do so," said Hill, who was born in 1983 in Los Angeles.

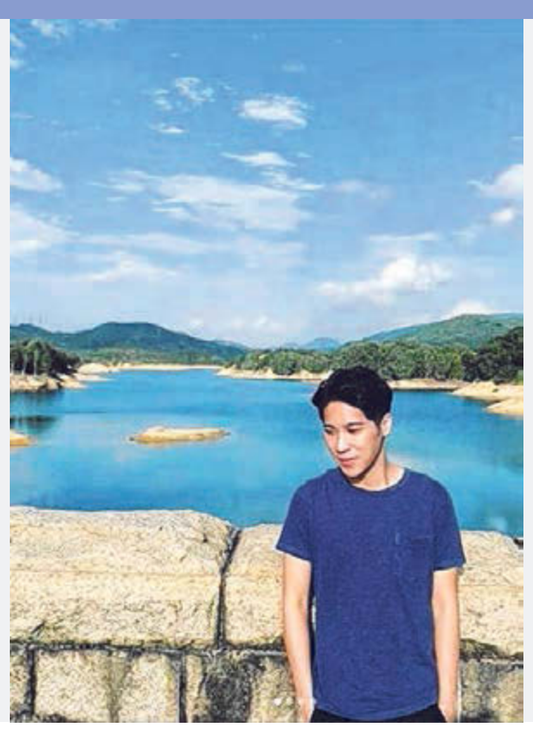
"We're kind of not saying what we mean and we're not actually expressing what's happening here... I just wanted to show that that's problematic," he said at a news conference.

Stevie desperately wants to be like the older boys and stays up late practising skateboarding techniques. He recklessly copies a stunt he has not yet mastered and ends up with a bloody head when he falls off a roof.

Hill, 35, said he spent his 20s doing what he thought others wanted him to do and though he loved movies such as Superbad (2007) that he starred in, they depicted "bro comedy" or "bro masculinity" and he wanted to do something different now.

"As I go forward as an artist, I can take all these kids that were raised the same way as I was, learning the same lessons, and help illuminate why maybe some of them weren't the best lessons in the entire world," he said, adding that he hoped Superbad fans would join him for the ride. REUTERS

On social media



DATING?: Hong Kong actress Natalie Tong, who was last year linked romantically to education consultant Samuel Chan (both left), may have let the cat out of the bag that they are dating after they posted on Instagram photos of themselves with the same background. Tong, 37, and Chan, 30, were spotted last year behaving like a couple, but she claimed then that "it was really just a dinner with friends".

She recently uploaded photos of herself on Instagram, with the caption, "enjoying the sun and tranquillity" on the first day of Chinese New Year. Chan, known as the "Wang Leehom of the education sector" due to his resemblance to the singer-songwriter, posted photos of himself with the same background, with the caption: "Wish everyone a healthy Chinese New Year of the Pig!" Both of them used the hashtag #hike. PHOTOS: INSTAGRAM/NATALIETONG53, INSTAGRAM/UKCHITCHAT

Lego movie tops box office but misses forecasts

LOS ANGELES • Movie audiences showed there is a limit to their appetite for all things Lego, with The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part falling short of forecasts in its debut weekend.

The film took in US$35 million (S$47.5 million) in the United States and Canada – good enough for first place at the box office while trailing the US$55 million projected by Box Office Pro.

The film is the fourth feature-length movie for the Warner Bros franchise, including the original Lego Movie in 2014 and others devoted to Batman and the Ninjago world of martial-arts characters, and the results over the next few weeks will be watched to determine whether more will follow.

Dan Lin, a producer of all four films, said before the weekend that he and the studio have not yet committed to a fifth movie.

The Lego Movie 2 takes some risks, he said. There is a lot more music and new characters, including Tiffany Haddish as a shape-shifting queen and Stephanie Beatriz of Brooklyn Nine-Nine (2013 to present) as the space-suited General Mayhem.

The movie's mixed reception may just reflect the sluggish start to this year for the broader industry, said Mr Paul Dergarabedian, researcher Comscore's senior media analyst. "The movie marketplace has been slow and lacking momentum since the beginning of the year and this malaise, albeit temporary, is definitely impacting even the newer releases' ability to garner much excitement."

Other new releases over the weekend were What Men Want in second place, Cold Pursuit in third and The Prodigy in sixth, Comscore reported.

BLOOMBERG

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